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Christopher M Davis



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Appreciative Inquiry: A Tool for Transformational Learning

Chris Davis, Baker College

This paper attempts to do three things. First, it provides a summary of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and the theory supporting AI as a process for transformational learning. Second, it describes a case study using AI for this purpose. Third, it provides an outline for an experiential AI session designed to demonstrate the power of this approach.

Transformational Learning

The goal of transformative learning is to produce a change in the learner's mental models. Mental models are used in both cognitive psychology (Caine, Caine, and Crowell, 1999; Wind and Crook, 2004) and organizational learning (Senge, 1990) to describe the structures that influence how we make sense of the world and take action. Senge describes them as "deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures of images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action. Very often, we are not consciously aware of our mental models or the effects they have on our behavior." (Senge, 1990, p. 8). In contrast to learning that changes what we know, transformative learning changes how we know (Kegan, 2000), and (Wind and Crook, 2004).

The process for achieving transformative learning is to become aware of the mental models at work in ourselves (Caine, Caine, and Crowell, 1999), (Mezirow, 2000), and (Wind and Crook, 2004). Mezirow advocates a process for achieving transformation through constructive discourse and critical reflection. This approach embodies a cognitive dissonance-based process that inherently forces the learner to confront negative or unsatisfactory aspects of her or his current self. This leads to a resistance to the learning. In his model of transformative learning, Boyd includes a grief stage in recognition of the emotional dimension to transformative changes. Ultimately, transformational change is a change in our sense of ourselves (Cain, Caine, and Crowell, 1999).

Mezirow's views the transformative learning process as having its origin either in a problem or deficit (Mezirow, 2000). This causes a disorienting dilemma leading to a negative self-examination, eventually leading to a critical assessment of mental models that provides the foundation for transformative learning. Boyd, who has a different conceptualization of transformative learning from Mezirow (Taylor, 1998), does share this problem-focused/deficit-based approach, which Boyd refers to as a "personal dilemma" (Boyd, 1991). Both Mezirow and Boyd appear to share a view held by many that change comes from crisis (Kofman and Senge, 1993). Appreciative Inquiry provides an alternative process for transformational learning that is neither problem-based nor deficit-focused.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers an alternative model to transformative learning for both individuals and organizations. Developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s, AI is a product of the positive psychology and organizational change movements. 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 transformation by altering the stories and narratives that define the organization and the individuals who make up the organization. The AI process uses a four-phase model to foster transformative learning known as the 4-D Cycle.

The first phase, Discovery, aims to identify the "best of what is" by soliciting and capturing stories about positive aspects of the current situation. Stories are central to the AI process, but the impact of stories is in the images of success that they create and foster. The centrality of experience is shared by AI and traditional models of transformative learning. However, in AI the rational discourse of traditional transformative learning is replaced by a mytho-poetic process as described by Dirx (1998).

The second phase, Dream, focuses on "what might be." The critical reflection of traditional transformative learning is replaced by a process of appreciative reflection. By emphasizing positives existing in the current condition, AI avoids the dissonance inherent in the critical approach. It also creates an environment for

transformation that does not require a “disorienting dilemma” nor feelings of guilt or shame that Mezirow identifies as phases in his model of transformative learning (Taylor, 1998).

During the third phase, Design, “provocative propositions” or design statements are articulated that capture the vision of the Dream phase. Based on the stories of Discovery, the Dream and Design phases clearly evoke the use of imagination and image in envisioning a desired future, another example of appreciative inquiry’s similarity with Dirkx’s transformative learning model (Dirkx, 1998).

Finally, the Destiny phase yields action plans that define “what will be” to achieve the design statements. The orientation towards action as the fulfillment of transformation follows the traditional process of transformative learning.

Appreciative Transformational Learning

Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003) describe a three stage model of change based on their experience working with AI. The first stage, elevation of inquiry, involves not only the initial asking of questions but also the exchange of stories amongst participants. Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003) explain that “inquiry and change are a simultaneous event, for the seeds of change are implicit in our questions. Our proposition is that human systems move in direction of the questions they create, ask, and address in collaboration.” (p. 235)

Across all three stages, there is an increasing relatedness to others that leads to deeper connection between individuals involved in the process. This process begins in the initial stage through the sharing of stories of success. This extends into the second phase, fusion of strengths, where the group yields increase positive energy as a result of the diversity of strengths that the individuals bring to the whole. This leads to the final stage, activation of energy. Cooperrider and Sekerka (2003) describe it as “an emergence of innovation, challenge, change, and breakthrough. An intensification of the relational resources of imagination and mutual support is observable, and people begin to view their world not as a static constraint but mobilized energy.” (p. 238) In other words, the final result of the AI process is transformational both for the group and the individuals in the group as energy from the process enables and inspires change.

One way of both understanding AI as a process for transformational learning and how it contrasts with traditional models of transformation learning is to compare the stages in both models. Mezirow (2000) identifies 10 phases in the transformative learning process. The first four phases (a disorienting dilemma, self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, and recognition of a shared discontent) can be thought of as forming the impetus for change. Discovery and Dream stages accomplish this function in the AI process, albeit in a very different way. Rather than looking at shortcomings, the AI process first looks for positives that already exists and then visualizes a better future. Where Mezirow’s model describes a change from something undesirable, AI motivates change towards something positive. The last six phases of Mezirow’s process (exploration of new options, planning a course of action, acquisition of knowledge, trying out new roles, building on competence, and reintegration) enact the change. In AI, some of this begins in the early stages since it is based on existing elements. This means that the learner should experience the transformation less as a radical change and more of continuation of development. The bulk of the enactment of the change process in AI occurs in the Design and Destiny stages, where the learners first envision a new future (Design) and then develop the roadmap to achieve that vision (Destiny).

In many ways, AI’s approach to transformational learning is very similar to other approaches. The AI process is structured around inquiry and asking questions that lead to reflection. This process includes both objective reframing by reflecting on the stories of others shared through the process and subjective reframing as the learner responds to the questions with their own stories. Through this process of conversation and sharing stories, people shape their future and build a path for change (Gergen 1999). Both AI and traditional transformation learning put the structure of critically responding to questions as a central part of the process. The distinction though, is that AI deliberately focuses questions aimed at soliciting positive experiences, stories, and emotions.

Research on positive emotions demonstrates one of the benefits of an appreciative approach to transformational learning. Frederickson (2003) offers a broaden-and-build model of the psychological impact of positive emotions. The broaden dimension results in individuals experiencing positive emotions to have greater thought-action repertoires than individuals experiencing neutral or negative emotions. Related to this aspect, positive emotions have been demonstrated to undo the negative physiological effects negative emotions. The build dimension increases an individual’s “upward spirals” that enable not only emotional well being but also resources for personal growth and development. These findings suggest that a transformational learning process based on positive emotions will be stronger than one based on negatives such as deficiencies. This is supported by data that 90% of patients who’ve had coronary bypass do not change the unhealthy lifestyles that led to the procedure

compared to 77% of participants in a program with a positive approach maintained healthier lifestyles after three years (Deutschman, 2005).

While Taylor (1998) reports that the role of learning has not been thoroughly addressed in the transformational learning literature, the role of relationships in AI is another component that makes appreciative transformational learning effective. AI creates an environment of sharing stories and experience that fosters a socially constructed meaning that can enable transformational learning. Gergen (1991) describes this process as it occurs in modern life. "One's identity is continuously emergent, re-formed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationship." (p. 139) AI provides a goal and target for this emergence that is directed by the focus of the inquiry. The AI process also provides a community to support the transformation process both for the individuals in the group and the group as a whole.

Appreciative Transformation Learning in Action

The Developmental Education Appreciative Inquiry project at Baker College provides an example of the AI process and its support for transformational learning. 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.

Two years earlier an effort to support transformative change had been spearheaded by a consultant on a much more limited scale. The consultant used a typical model of transformation learning aimed at confronting faculty on how existing teaching strategies were insufficient for student success. 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 four campuses in the pilot dropped out of the project. While some individuals did ultimately benefit from the process, none of the individuals or campuses involved were willing to continue working with the consultant even when he offered to donate his time. 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.

In September and early October 2004, ten AI sessions were offered on the campuses of the system with a total of 100 participants. 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 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 were 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 results of the survey were used to identify gaps between items that faculty felt were important but not very present in the current conditions. Ten items were identified as major gaps. These were divided into three categories for further action. Some items were already being worked on, which was reported back to the faculty in a follow-up session. Some of the items required additional research and investigation. Other items needed more description and development by the faculty, and at follow-up Destiny sessions they were given discussion questions for each of these items. The results from these discussions were captured and copied and will be used to generate proposals for new interventions.

This narrative describes the larger system transformation at work, but underneath this level, there are changes occurring at the campus and individual level as well. 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 it reached the attention of the campus presidents. Reports from the campuses show greater collaboration amongst faculty and new levels of energy. Deans also report faculty trying new approaches and methods to increase student success.

Appreciative Transformation Learning: An Activity

The best way to understand the effectiveness of transformational learning is to experience it. What follows is an outline of a conference session to employ the Appreciative Inquiry process to demonstrate both the process and impact of this model for transformational learning. The focus of the inquiry will be the conference itself. At the outset of the session, Appreciative Inquiry will be introduced and an overview of the 4-D process will be provided. (5 minutes)

The first part of the process is Discovery. During this section, each participant will interview a partner using the following questions:

- Think of a time when you experienced transformative learning at a conference or workshop. What was the transformation? What circumstances caused it to occur? What has been the impact on your life? How do you think this experience has impacted how you facilitate the learning of others?
- So far at this conference, what has been the most transformational thing that you have learned? What are you going to take away from the conference that will be useful for you either as a transformational learner or facilitator?

Participants will have 10 minutes to complete both interviews. Then each pair will join another pair. Each participant will introduce the person she or he interviewed to the rest of the small group using the answers from the questions (10 minutes). We will then have a brief time (5 minutes) for sharing before moving onto the Dream phase.

For the Dream, participants will be asked to look ahead to the ideal sixteenth transformative learning conference ten years from now and have 10 minutes to discuss in their small groups the following questions:

- What will the conference be like?
- What will the sessions be like?
- What will be the ideas that will be discussed?
- What will we know about transformative learning that we don't know now?
- From your discussions, write three observations that describe your dreams.

We will use one or more of the ideas from the attendees as the basis for the Design stage, where we will translate the dream into a "provocative proposition" statement. A provocative proposition is a design statement that defines the vision described in the dream phase. Finally, in the Destiny stage we will have a group brainstorming on what action each participant can take to work towards fulfillment of the dream and design.

Concluding Remarks

Research on positive psychology suggests that appreciative approaches to change might be more productive and less resisted than traditional transformative learning models. Appreciative Inquiry is one existing process that can be used to facilitate transformative learning in both individuals and groups that harnesses a positive approach. This paper has attempted to provide a brief introduction to the theory, practice, and application of this approach, but certainly more can be done to understand both the theoretical and applied dimensions of a positive approach to transformative learning. AI is one approach, but certainly not the only formal process that can be envisioned. There is a body of scholarship informed by the traditional critical reflective approach to transformative learning, but not yet one informed by appreciative reflection. Hopefully, by the time of the sixteenth transformative learning conference, this line of inquiry will yield greater understanding of the application of positive thinking to transformation learning.

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Chris Davis, Baker College, chris.davis@baker.edu. Presented at the Sixth International Transformative Learning Conference, Michigan State University, Oct. 6-9, 2005.

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