Using Appreciative Inquiry to Build and Enhance a Learning Culture

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has emerged as a powerful organization development philosophy that builds on past successes to impel positive change. AI is a highly participative, holistic approach to change that values the wisdom of members of the organization and amplifies positive forces. This session will introduce AI as a tool to enhance participant experience and learning culture in adult educational settings. Participants will learn introductory concepts of AI by experiencing a "mini-inquiry" and group conversation.

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This innovative session will introduce some core concepts of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). It will include an overview of AI's development during the past 20 years, its under girding principles, and the presentation of a process for AI. We will then explore the use of AI in educational settings—by reviewing evidence of how it has begun to be used in educational settings as well as group conversation about its potential. Each of these topics is briefly discussed below.

Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry

David Cooperrider and his mentor Suresh Srivastva of Case Western Reserve University developed Appreciative Inquiry in the early 1980s. While conducting a traditional OD assessment of the Cleveland Clinic seeking what was wrong with the organization, Cooperrider was surprised at how much was "right" and the enthusiasm organization members had in telling these positive stories. This prompted Cooperrider to further consider the merits of investigating positive forces in organizations through his dissertation (Cooperider, 1986) and AI was born (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Zemke, 1999).

AI is an OD (organizational development) methodology that "is a collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the 'life-giving forces' that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 14). In contrast with traditional OD methods which seek out problems in the organization and work to fix them, AI

> involves systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively comparable….(it) involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential. (Cooperider & Whitney, 2000)

AI fundamentally seeks out what has worked well in the past and guides participants through a process to build on these successes

AI is a fundamental shift in thinking so it must be viewed as more than a "tool, technique, or intervention" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 21). AI is a philosophy with a supporting methodology. It revolves around five key principles:

(a) The constructionist principle: This principle recognizes and accepts the social constructionist stance toward reality and social knowledge. That is, that what we believe to be real in the world is created through our social discourse.

(b) The simultaneity principle: This principle states that the "first question is fateful" in that the organization will turn its energy in the direction of that first question of an inquiry. As a result, the seeds of change are embedded in that question.

(c) The poetic principle: This principle emphasizes the value of story telling as a way to gather more holistic information that includes not only facts, but also feelings that affect a person's experiences.

(d) The anticipatory principle: This principle emphasizes that behavior and decisions about actions are based not only on what we were born with or learned from in our environment, but also on what we anticipate. That is to say that what we think or imagine *will* happen in the future.

(e) The positive principle. Finally, this principle is a foundational belief that a positive approach to any issue is a valid basis for learning and just as contagious as a negative approach can be. This makes the positive stance an antidote to cynicism.

Phases of Appreciative Inquiry

The practice of AI typically occurs in five phases: define, discover, dream, design, and destiny (Watkins & Mohr, 2002). Each of these phases is described below.

Define. AI is a marked departure from traditional OD, which focuses on identifying and solving problems. Therefore, it is very important that the organization make an educated decision to proceed. It is vital that the organization understand the focus of the inquiry will be on the positive. Without this agreement, a consultant will be in a constant battle with the organization – which may expect problems to be identified and solved as opposed to the holistic approach to improving/changing the organization that AI offers. Once that agreement has been made, an AI practitioner will work very hard with the client to effectively define the focus of the inquiry given the needs and context of the organization.

Discovery. The discovery phase is about "appreciating and valuing the best of what is" (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). This phase has two parts. First, interviews provide opportunity to gather stories of the organization's life giving forces. Life giving forces are those things that spur it in a positive direction; without these forces, the organization would cease to succeed. The construction of the interview protocol is critical. How the questions are framed guide the nature of the stories received. Watkins and Mohr (2001) provide a generic interview protocol that models the "spirit of AI… [and is] easily modified to fit whatever topic the organization has chosen to focus on" (p. 83). Using the interview protocol, members of the organization can interview each other in pairs or select representatives can conduct the interviews. Data from the interviews should be collected in a manner that can be shared with others in the organization. One effective way of doing this is to have each interview pair/group combine with other pairs/groups to share what they have learned from each other.

The second part of discovery involves participants of the intervention actively engaging in identifying common themes from the interviews/stories. These themes should reflect the life-giving forces heard in the shared stories, and are the basis for the next phase of the AI process.

Dream. This phase involves the creation of a shared vision of the future. It "encourages the participants to think about 'what could be' by challenging them to think outside the traditional boundaries of what has been done in the past" (Johnson and Leavitt, 2001, p. 131). During this stage participants are asked to write provocative propositions about "what might be" (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). Provocative propositions are metaphorical images of the new organization based on the themes identified. This is an opportunity for participants to be extremely creative in making their point. Provocative propositions should speak to the soul and ignite energy—they can be represented in words, art, drama, etc.

Design. Once the organization has dreamt together about what could be, it is time for participants to operationalize those dreams and begin to "speculate on how the organization will look and agree upon driving concepts and principles" (Zemke, 1999, p. 31). This phase examines the provocative propositions and identifies organizational supports needed to work towards that ideal. Participants "speculate on how their organization will look and act once they have articulated the organizational visions [provocative propositions]" (Hagevik, 2000, p. 39). Hammond (1998) calls this "dialoguing what should be" (p. 24).

Destiny. Commonly understood as delivery or implementation, the Destiny phase is about sustainability and "innovating what will be" (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). During this phase action plans are implemented to bring the design to life. This is the enactment of the Dream, and involves continuous monitoring, feedback processes, and adapting as the process unfolds.

Appreciative Inquiry in Practice

AI has found practical application in many areas. A sampling of the literature reveals its use in both corporate and personal areas. Some examples are highlighted here:

- Dr. Sandra Hagevik, a career consultant, describes how AI can be used to guide someone's career path. She asks individuals to focus on what works for them in their career/life rather than the problems with their current career. Dr. Hagevik describes four phases of AI (Discovery, Dreaming, Design, and Destiny) and relates them to the individual (Hagevik, 2000).
- In *Meet the Freight Fairy*, Gordon (2003) describes how Roadway Express uses AI as a tool to involve employees in finding ways for the organization to become more efficient.

- Dr. Courtney Pullen describes his awakening to AI in both his career as a psychotherapist and as a financial planner. He realized that by changing the focus of his questions he could help his clients reach their goals more effectively (Pullen, 2001).
- AI has been used in program evaluation. Faculty and students of the University of South Dakota's Technology for Education and Training Program embarked on an appreciative evaluation of the master's and specialist's degree programs. They took an appreciative approach, conducted web-based interviews and follow-up calls to collect data, identified themes, and made numerous changes to the two programs based on the feedback (Norum, Wells, Hoadley, & Geary, 2002).

Appreciative Inquiry in the Classroom

HRD and adult education professionals will likely find great potential in AI as a tool to enhance learning cultures in educational settings. By viewing the classroom (or other non-traditional learning settings) as its own bound system, you can compare it to an organization with inputs and outputs. Many facets of the classroom are flexible and can be designed to meet the needs/desires of students. Among the aspects that can be modified are the seating, the method of content delivery, the types of interaction, etc. Engaging learners in an AI process to design their ideal learning experience will likely lead to more involved students and result in a higher degree of learning transfer.

Guiding students through an AI process, as described in previous sections, will result in themes and provocative propositions that can then be used to structure the rest of the learning experience (i.e. the course, etc…). The instructor using the input from the AI process can do this, or it may involve representative learners working with the instructor. The goal is to implement the destiny phase by creating a learning experience that extends the best experiences learners have had in the past to create and maintain ways to ensure the best possible learning community and optimal learning in the current setting.

A review of the literature revealed very limited evidence related to using AI in educational settings. Two sources were identified that directly addressed using AI in the classroom. Each took a different approach to how they incorporated it.

In the first article, *Appreciative Pedagogy: Constructing Positive Models for Learning*, the authors use the term Appreciative Pedagogy to describe their adaptation of AI in the classroom. Yballe & O'Connor (2000) state, "appreciative pedagogy enacts in the learning endeavor AI's basic beliefs, values, and social inquiry process" (p. 476). Believing that students come to the classroom with a wide range of experiences on which they can reflect, "appreciative pedagogy trusts in, celebrates, and deliberately seeks out students' experiences of success and moments of high energy and great pride" (p. 476). As in AI, Appreciative Pedagogy "seeks to discover and celebrate" (Yballe & O'Connor, 2000, p. 477) past successes, using them to generate positive visions for the current class. The authors agreed with Cooperrider (2000) that positive visions lead to positive, energizing actions.

The authors do not equate Appreciative Pedagogy with AI. Rather, it is a necessary adaptation due to the nature of the classroom. Different from a large organization, the classroom is "temporary and is relatively closed to its environment" (Yballe & O'Connor, 2000, p. 477). The focus is short-term and pertains more to an individual or small group level than when dealing with a large organization; that is, the impact is not as wide spread. Appreciative Pedagogy can occur in a shorter time frame and be adapted to meet the time frame available. Yballe and O'Connor provide examples of applying Appreciative Pedagogy to envision best teams, presentations, managers, and organizations.

Yballe & O'Connor (2000) report that the outcomes of using Appreciative Pedagogy were similar to those promised from AI. They found that students were more energized and felt safe to speak up in the created environment. Content seemed more meaningful because it was presented in a way that was personally meaningful. Additionally, students had a more hopeful view of the future and demonstrated more trust and confidence in their abilities and experiences, as well as those of others in the class. Finally, students began to see AI (or Appreciative Pedagogy) as a creative and meaningful way to analyze situations (Yballe & O'Connor 2000).

The second article that reports a direct application of AI in the classroom relates to a 5-day executive training program. In *Using Appreciative Learning in Executive Education,* Preziosi and Gooden (2002) define Appreciative Learning as "a positive instructional method that is based upon AI" (p. 10). Appreciative Learning, like Appreciative Inquiry and Appreciative Pedagogy, asks the learner to identify and celebrate the positive experiences that have helped them to succeed. Their 5-day program was facilitator-driven and questions posed to participants were appreciative in nature, encouraging a focus on the successful moments of their career. As in the previously cited case, the researchers reported positive results. There was a heightened energy level and a reduced anxiety level. There was also an increased willingness to speak up and share with the group, and the statements that were made

had "high emotional impact" (Preziosi &Gooden, 2002, p. 14). The authors contend that part of the success of this program lay in the fact that the participants came with experience from which they can tap to build something new. Those experiences create a powerful momentum towards the future!

Future Implications

AI is an engaging approach, involving the participants in a collaborative manner in creating positive change. This is congruent with the learner-centered principles of adult education, which call for building on participants' experience, starting where the participant is, and engaging the participant in the learning. Carrying these principles into HRD, will result in more committed, engaged employees.

The scholarly research on AI is still emerging, and there is even less on AI in the educational settings such as those in which HRD professionals conduct their work. However, the results and outcomes thus far are quite promising and there is a great need for more application and study of AI. Several approaches seem quite promising from the research perspective. For instance, a case study could be conducted with a traditional course that incorporates AI by taking learners through the process of designing a vibrant learning community and then modifying the course design accordingly. Another avenue for future research could be a comparative study of two learning events – one that maintains a traditional format and one that actively incorporates an AI approach. In both cases, it would be interesting to solicit general reactions to the learning event, estimates of whether the amount of work (for the learners and instructors) differed, opinions about the development of community within the learning setting, and a rating of the likelihood of learners and instructors to utilize an AI approach in the future based on this experience. Of course, it would also be valuable to know whether the use of AI actually enhances what people learned and what they do with that learning.

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