

In support of Appreciative Inquiry

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i. Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) emanated from the PhD work of David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s. Founded upon social constructionist theories (Berger & Luckmann 1966, Gergen 2009), it is an approach to organizational change that eschews traditionally used former Organization Development (OD) deficit models in favour of a positive approach to change that builds a vision for the future based upon what already works well within an existing system. It also provides a framework for researching or evaluating different forms of professional practice, including learning, teaching and the student experience. Its self-empowering philosophy, effected through the '4-D' process (Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny), is realized through the collaborative working of all stakeholders within an institution; through systematic participation in a jointly constructed vision of an organization's future, they become an integral part of its success. At its core is the unconditional positive question, which seeks out the best of 'what is' in order to prompt the collective imagination to envision 'what might be'.

The use of AI within higher education (HE) in the UK is currently under-developed, and existing studies of the application of AI to the HE context have tended to focus principally on the areas of teaching and institutional change. We would suggest that the publication of recent sector-focused books on AI (e.g. Cockell, McArthur-Blair & Schiller (2013) 'Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force'), may stimulate the increased use of AI in the HE context.

ii. Institutional Research (IR)

At the heart of the rationale for institutional research lies an organisation's commitment to quality enhancement and organisational change. The approach many universities take to IR is to engage in relatively intensive, short-term project work with a set of clearly defined aims and objectives (Kahn and Baume 2003). In the field of educational development, the researcher's lens invariably focuses on academics and their practices, thereby potentially exposing weaknesses and shortcomings. The methodologies employed invariably focus on identifying and solving problems - ways of working that have served us well when developing our knowledge of the natural world, but have proved less successful in social settings. Humans tend to respond better when we seek to see the best of one another (Cockell & McArthur-Blair 2012). Appreciative Inquiry is both a philosophy and a practice, and should be considered by institutional researchers who wish to both strengthen an organisation and motivate its staff to create an even more productive working environment.

iii. Higher Education Academy (HEA) Project at University of Worcester

Our first experience of AI was in 2008 when we led a HEA-supported project called 'Developing Inclusive Curricula in Higher Education'. The project aimed to improve the learning experiences of disabled students by further embedding effective inclusive practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design in all academic departments within the University of Worcester (UW). This was to be achieved through the implementation of an innovative staff development package that addressed the needs of academic and non-teaching staff.

Central to the project was the recognition that many academic staff remained uncertain about how to avoid direct and indirect discrimination; that is to say they were unclear about what was 'reasonable' in making adjustments to practice to accommodate disabled students' particular needs, and were also uncertain about what changes could be made that would not compromise competence standards. The project aimed to help academic staff establish a clear understanding of the core requirements of their courses and identify areas where adjustments may or may not be possible. The project also sought to encourage staff to ensure that disability issues were considered in any new course developments, course validation processes and reviews. Additionally, resources would be developed, trialled, and

made available to staff to help them acquire knowledge, skill and confidence in effecting changes to teaching, learning and assessment practices without compromising academic standards.

Key to the success of the project was securing the engagement of the academic staff, which is never a straightforward task. Initial discussions within the project team focused on conducting an audit of how existing learning and teaching practices impacted upon the student experience. At this initial stage it was widely believed that we needed to carry out a fault diagnosis exercise in order to determine what was 'not working' before we could devise and implement a plan to 'fix' the problems. We also acknowledged that any form of data collection should probably involve the students, either as subjects or researchers.

During an HEA planning event, Professor Glynis Cousin (University of Wolverhampton), outlined an alternative approach to the more widely used - and more readily accepted - deficit models of investigation. This method was 'Appreciative Inquiry', developed by Cooperrider (2001), it is a way of working which eschews former Organization Development (OD) deficit models in favour of a positive approach to change that builds a vision for the future and is based upon what already works well within an existing system

To provide an illustration of its use, in our project a student researcher asked fellow students to use three positive adjectives (no negative ones allowed!) to describe the learning environment created by the lecturer and to identify one change which would make it even better. The aim was to celebrate what was already working well, and then to generate new ideas in an effort to dream and design a better, collectively desired future, which would ultimately lead to enhanced practice and an even more positive working environment.

The student researchers presented their results to teaching staff at a staff development session attended by the Vice Chancellor of the University, the Chief Executive of the British Paralympic Association and the Director of the Academic Development and Practice Unit at the University. Each student introduced themselves in turn and spoke of the challenges they had faced in their educational and personal lives and how these had been overcome, often citing the interventions and pedagogic practice of the members of staff who were present in the audience. The presentations were extremely well received by all the staff and assembled guests. The overt enthusiasm of staff demonstrated unequivocally the success of the early stages of the AI approach in gaining the interest, trust and engagement of academic staff.

iv. Reflections

We consider that the project's success was almost certainly due to the decision to adopt AI. In their seminal article, Cooperrider & Srivastva (1987) argued three main points in support of AI. Firstly, they critiqued the problem-solving approach that, at that time, dominated action-research. They argued that problem-solving, as a tool for social innovation, left a great deal to be desired. Secondly, they suggested that organisations were best viewed as socially constructed realities, and as such were constrained only by human imagination and the shared beliefs of members in the organisation. Thus, forms of problem-solving inquiry were as likely to create more of the same problems which they were intended to solve. Finally, they reasoned, that for change to take place it was essential to create an environment where new ideas could flourish. Their contention was that conventional action-research stifled imagination and new ideas, and proposed Appreciative Inquiry as a method that was more likely to create new ideas, images and theories that would help to produce lead to social innovations.

Cooperrider and Sekerka (2006) felt strongly that inquiry into what people appreciate helps to strengthen relationships in an organisation and increases positive emotions. They argued that promotion of positive emotions is a first and vital step in the change process. This was absolutely the case at Worcester, where staff were invited to listen to a series of student presentations that celebrated their experiences as learners and, in so doing, acknowledged the role the lecturers played in inspiring them to achieve. Consequently, staff were very happy to consider new practices and strategies which would lead to enhancements in learning and teaching for their students. This supports Cooperrider and Sekerka's (2006) assertion, highlighted by Bushe (2011), that positive feelings lead people to be more flexible, creative, integrative, open to information and efficient in their thinking. Certainly our experiences at Worcester would suggest that colleagues experiencing an initial positive affect were likely to be more resilient and so more able to cope with future personal criticism and occasional adversity.

We would endorse contention made by Bushe in his chapter *Appreciative Inquiry: Theory and Critique* (2011) that it may be the ability of AI to inspire a positive atmosphere among members of an organisation toward a change process that has made it so popular among managers and consultants; however, he is also right to stress that positive affect is not in itself enough to sustain organisational change. If the transformational potential of AI is to be realised, then steps need to be put in place to ensure that ideas are generated and

harnessed while structures for implementation are widely agreed. The Worcester case study, project has been hugely influential internally and externally. For example, an increasing number of colleagues at UW have become interested and actively involved in disability sport. Furthermore, the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science at UW now enjoys a national and international reputation for its work in this area.

However, I believe the most far-reaching impact of the project has been the successful adoption of the AI methodology (Cooperrider 2001). Since our first encounter with AI, it has been widely used across a number of academic and service departments in the University and across the sector. All projects leaders have reported how successful it has been in securing the support and engagement of colleagues and they suggested that without its use the generation of ideas and a future commitment to institutional change would not have been achieved.

We are also able to demonstrate impact in other institutions. Through a series of local, national and international conference presentations and consultancies, we have been able to convey how powerful Appreciative Inquiry (AI) can be as an approach to organisational change. In July 2011 we were invited to deliver a consultancy workshop on AI at Southampton Solent Business School. It was very well received by Solent staff and helped influence the team to submit an ultimately successful bid for an HEA project on Employability. Professor Andrews, Head of the School wrote: The workshop helped us “understand the value of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in identifying and facilitating change... as a result we decided to use AI in a project funded by the HEA... the project led to a number of actions to improve graduate employability. It has already had a positive impact within our institution.”

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Further Reading

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