Appreciative Inquiry – A Research Tool for Institutional Change

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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 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 in the UK is not yet well-developed and existing studies of the application of AI to this context have tended to focus principally on the areas of teaching and institutional change. It is suggested that through the publication of recent books such as 'Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force' (Cockell, McArthur-Blair & Schiller, 2013), it will perhaps become more widely adopted in this context.

Institutional Research

At the heart of the rationale for institutional research lies an organisation's commitment to change. The approach many universities take 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.

HEA Project at University of Worcester

Our first experience of AI was in 2008 when we led a HEA-supported project: 'Developing Inclusive Curricula in Higher Education'. The aims of the project were to improve the learning experience of disabled students by further embedding effective inclusive practices in learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design throughout all academic departments within the University of Worcester (UW). These aims were 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 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. In addition, the project sought to encourage staff to ensure that disability issues were considered in any new course developments, course validation processes and reviews. Further, 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, never a straightforward task. Initial discussions within the team focused on conducting an audit of how existing learning and teaching practices impacted upon the student experience. At that 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 we were made aware of an alternative approach by Professor Glynis Cousin (University of Wolverhampton), which offered an alternative to the more widely used and more readily accepted deficit models of investigation: 'Appreciative Inquiry'

(Cooperrider et al., 2001). To provide an illustration of its use in this context, a student researcher asked fellow students to use 3 positive (no negative ones allowed!) adjectives to describe the learning environment created by the lecturer and finally to identify one thing which would make it even better. The aim was to celebrate what is already working well, then to generate new ideas in an effort to dream and design a better, collectively desired future, which ultimately leads to enhanced practice and an even more positive working environment.

The student researchers presented their results to teaching staff at a staff development session in the presence of the Vice Chancellor of the University, Chief Executive of the British Paralympic Association and the Director of the Academic Development and Practice Unit at the University. Each student in turn introduced themselves 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 sat 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.

Reflections

That the project was so successful 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, arguing that problem-solving, as a tool for social innovation, left a great deal to be desired. Secondly, they argued 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, they argued, 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 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 which 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.

In Bushe's *Appreciative Inquiry: Theory and Critique* (2011), we would endorse his contention 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. With regard to the Worcester case study, the 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, we believe the most far-reaching impact has been the successful adoption of the AI methodology (Cooperrider et al., 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, without which, 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, one of the authors was 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: " ... *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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Biographies

Will Bowen-Jones is currently the Head of the Educational Development Unit at University of Worcester. Will's teaching career started in 1981 as a Secondary PE teacher in Leicester and he left full-time teaching in 1997. He began his career in HE at the University of Worcester in 1999 as a lecturer in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science (ISES), teaching on the undergraduate sports programmes. This was soon followed with his first leadership roles: The undergraduate Sports Studies course and the PGCE Secondary PE Programme. He relinquished the latter position to take charge of Learning and Teaching in the Institute and held this title from 2004 until 2013. He was appointed Associate Head in 2008, also taking the Lead for Quality Enhancement. He has maintained strong links with the key professional bodies in the Sector. He was the Institute's representative in the old Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (HLST) subject centre of the HEA and has been a regular attendee and presenter at HEA, SEDA, HECU and HEIR national conferences. He has presented at International Learning and Teaching Conferences; EDULEARN, INTED and ICERI, where he has also chaired of a number of conference symposia. In 2011 he was made a Senior Teaching Fellow of the University.

Val Chapman (PhD, MSc, Cert Ed, Dip RSA [SpLD]) is currently the Director of the Centre for Inclusive Learning Support at the University of Worcester (UW). She has an international reputation in the field of Disability and Inclusion in Higher Education, having been recognised in 2004 with the award of a National teaching Fellowship, and in 2005 by the designation of her Centre as a partner in the LearnHigher Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. From 2006 to 2007 she held a UNESCO funded Chair in Special Education at Qatar University alongside her UW responsibilities. In addition to her University roles, Val's former external roles have included employment by the Quality Assurance Agency as a Subject Reviewer and Institutional Auditor; a reviewer in the United Nations Development Project: "Enhancement of Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning at Arab Universities",and was the external member on the Royal Veterinary College's Teaching and Learning Quality Committee (2005/2009). Val has published chapters in books and articles in a wide range of academic journals and newsletters; she has presented at numerous national and international conferences, frequently as an invited speaker.

Nick Breeze is currently the Learning and Teaching Research Projects Officer in the Institute of Sports and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester, where he supports academic colleagues with research projects. His previous roles have included Teaching Fellow in Education at the University of Bristol, secondary music teacher, composer, performer and conductor. His research interests focus on learning and teaching in Higher Education, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Education and Multimodal Research Methods.