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Co-Creating Futures: Appreciative Inquiry in Learning and Development

By Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell

Imagine yourself in a workshop or planning session where everyone is fully engaged in the process, holistic learning is happening, and participants are ‘leaning in’ with their hearts, minds, and spirits.

Appreciative Inquiry, a powerful, outcome-focused process that can enable this holistic learning, seeks to “understand what an institution

and the people in it are longing to do and what their communities are calling for them to do... It is born from the wisdom of community; it is work that involves those affected; and it is work that takes

time to ask the most fateful questions about the future.” (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 216).

As learning and organizational consultants, we work with organizations of all kinds to bring Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into their learning and development experiences. In our book, *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force* (2012), we illustrate the many uses of AI for learning and development through stories and case studies from around the

world. We also offer theory, models, and applications that can be used in a variety of organizations. In this article, we will outline Appreciative Inquiry and its uses in learning and development.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative Inquiry is an energizing approach for sparking positive change in people, groups, and organizations. It focuses on what is working well (appreciative) by engaging people in asking questions and telling stories (inquiry). The shift in focus to the positive generates energy within the group or organization, allowing it to move more effectively toward its goals. As well as a process for facilitating positive change, AI is a way of being and seeing the world every day. Its assumption is simple: every human system (individual, group, organization, community) “has something that works right - things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways...” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. XVII).

Appreciative Inquiry was developed by David Cooperrider et al in the early 1980s, and has been successfully applied in many organizations because it creates energy and generates positive change as people discover and build on their core “life-giving forces” to co-create their futures.

Appreciative Inquiry's foundation is a set of five basic principles that underpin the methodology. Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, in *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (2003), p. 54, summarizes these five principles:

1. The **constructionist principle**, briefly is "words create worlds". People create their understanding of their worlds socially, "through language and conversation". Reality is not separate from the people who are constructing it. People construct realities, good or bad, together.
2. The **simultaneity principle** states, "inquiry creates change". Inquiry and change are not separate from each other. As soon as questions are asked, change happens.
3. The **poetic principle** states, "we can choose what we study". People interpret poetry in different ways, choosing to focus on what is meaningful to them. This is also true for people in organizations who can choose what to focus on.
4. The **anticipatory principle** suggests that "image inspires action". The images people hold for the future drive their actions in the present to get to that future.
5. The **positive principle** underpins all the other principles of AI. It states that "positive questions lead to positive change". So the more positive an inquiry is, the more positive its results.

Appreciative Inquiry is built on discovering what is working well in order to build the future. The first task is to define the affirmative topic - the desired outcome that will be explored through Appreciative Inquiry. Sample affirmative topics might be:

- Being a highly effective team
- The organization at its best in 10 years
- Vibrant community engagement
- Being a highly effective learning organization

There are several AI models that can be used to explore the affirmative topic. Here we describe one, the 4-D cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny, as outlined in the *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook* (Cooperrider & Whitney & Stavros, 2003), p.15:

- Discovery is the first step of "appreciating, valuing the best of what is" and engages people through interviews, storytelling, and sharing emergent themes.
- Dream is the second step of "envisioning what might be", and engages groups in creating visual and word images for their ideal futures.
- Design is the third step of "dialoguing what should be" where participants co-construct their ideal future through identifying strategies and actions to get there.
- Destiny is the last step of "innovating what will be", and

is ongoing, putting the strategies and actions into effect. People find ways to not only sustain the changes they have co-constructed but also to co-create more, while celebrating successes along the way. Sometimes this last D is called Delivery or Deliver or just Do It! The key is that all these steps are focused around the affirmative topic chosen at the beginning of the process and used as a structure throughout the inquiry.

Appreciative Inquiry in Learning and Development

We define learning and development as all aspects of organizational change where individuals and groups grow and advance the organization: •

Learning new skills

- Overcoming conflict
 - Working well in teams
 - Expanding our view of the organization in order to develop its strategic plan
 - Learning how to reach one's full potential at work
- Appreciative Inquiry provides the language, models, principles, and research to articulate and deepen the practices of establishing effective platforms for organizational learning and of imagining future possibilities. Five key elements of Appreciative Inquiry in facilitating learning and development are: 1.

Creating an appreciative climate

2. Focusing on inquiry
3. Planning for the future
4. Assessing appreciatively
5. 'Being AI'

Creating an Appreciative Climate

Facilitators of learning and development can use AI along with other strategies to create an appreciative climate for learning and working together, where everyone feels respected and connected to one another. AI works well with other collaborative learning strategies to create an appreciative space for learning. For example, co-creating agreements for learning together is inspired by starting with an AI Discovery question, in pairs, "What is one of your best learning experiences? Tell me that story." These stories create a space of learning about each other and ideas about effective learning. Following the paired storytelling, groups create key themes to share with the whole group about how to work well together through, for example, respect, active listening, and engaged participation. Facilitators of learning use many strategies that work well to co-create an appreciative climate.

Focusing on Inquiry

An important aspect of AI is to reframe an inquiry that focuses on problems into one that focuses on what is working well. In formal and

informal settings, inquiry (questions, research, discovery, conversations) encourages collaborative and cooperative learning and is essential to organizational learning and change. Reframing as an ongoing practice can ignite a full inquiry that takes a reframed topic through a complete 4-D cycle (see above). For example, we worked with teams who considered themselves dysfunctional and wanted help. Identifying dysfunctions and reframing them into what the team wanted was key to beginning their Appreciative Inquiry into being a high functioning team.

Using the 4-D cycle:

1. The Discovery phase included storytelling that illustrated when the team had been high functioning. The assumption was that there were examples, no matter how infrequent or small, that illustrated the desired state of being a high-functioning team.
2. From this Discovery, themes of highfunctioning teams emerged and were built on in the Dream phase where images of the preferred future were created.
3. Design was a very important phase because it moved the Dream into a plan for actualizing their future.
4. Destiny was the delivery of the plan, beginning with initiating actions of being a high-functioning team. Ongoing AI enhanced and sustained the learning and development

around the practice of being a high-functioning team.

Planning for the Future

Planning for the future is one of the most powerful uses of Appreciative Inquiry. Groups and organizations of all sizes need to plan for the future. An organization of over 1000 people wanted to engage themselves and the community around them in designing the future. Using the 4-D cycle described above, they engaged groups of 1200, 500, and 30, and asked them to Discover, Dream, and Design the future with them. The outcomes of this were not just a new plan for the future but ownership in the future success of the organization and pride in being part of developing the plan.

Assessing Appreciatively

Assessment from an Appreciative Inquiry lens is key to ongoing learning and development. In formal learning settings, an AI approach to assessment focuses on what learners have learned well and what more could be achieved. This focus on inquiry and assessment is done from an appreciative stance and is what we refer to as 'being AI'. In the team example above, assessing the successes in the plan maintained the energy and focus on being high functioning. Celebrating as the successes are acknowledged helps keep everyone focused on continuous learning and development

'Being AI'

'Being AI' means living with an appreciative stance - a way of looking at situations and people by inquiring into what is good about them. This daily practice of AI applies in all learning and development environments and "involves seeing in others - family, community members, work colleagues, strangers - and in oneself what is good: the strengths, successes, attributes that give energy, the positive life-giving core" (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012, p. 78).

Living from an appreciative stance involves the everyday practice of AI principles described above and is supported by scientific research of positive psychologists (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2002) who study the links between positive emotions, such as hope, joy, love,

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appreciation, and people's ability to flourish. Appreciative Inquiry is a process, theory, and practice that enhances learning and development by aligning the heart, mind, and spirit in working toward positive change. **CSTD**

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