Exploring Appreciative Inquiry

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"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths,
but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs,
that it might benefit those who listen."
(Ephesians 4:29, NIV)

Abstract

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is the practice of asking positive questions designed to encourage positive thinking and reflection, promoting positive potential and stimulating higher performance. This paper contains two exploratory studies conducted in workplace and classroom environments. The use of AI in the workplace environment was possibly a contributing factor to a sales increase and, in the classroom, the use of AI seemed to correlate with higher self-perception of English speaking ability. We conclude that AI is useful and applicable in both environments because AI improved self-esteem, built self-confidence, motivated and empowered individuals toward better performance, and inspired a greater probability that they would share and apply their learning and insights with those they interact with.

Introduction

In the professional and educational environments, people can choose to build others up through questions and words of encouragement, or they can choose to use words and questions that focus on deficiencies or problems. According to Dornyei (2001), lowering affective filters and motivating performance are important factors to consider when teaching students. In this project, the authors chose to explore the option of encouraging others through Appreciative Inquiry in the workplace and classroom environments while searching for a correlation between the two settings.

Theory and Background

"Appreciative Inquiry involves the art and practice of asking…'unconditional positive question(s)'…that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential" (Cooperrider, Stavros, & Whitney, 2003, p. 3) in order to encourage positive thinking. Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, and Kaplin (2002) suggested that performance is enhanced when questions help others recall their high performance patterns. Moreover, Whitney & Trosten-Bloom (2003), citing Peter Drucker, remarked that "leading change is about aligning people's strengths so that their weaknesses become irrelevant" (p. viii).

In 1987, Cooperrider and Sirvastva published *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* in which they coined the term Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which is now a commonly practiced organizational development tool that helps identify and implement changes within an organization. AI marks a shift in organizational thinking by focusing on the positives and aims to enhance successes. In contrast, traditional businesses try to identify problems and work on the problems' elimination. AI, on the other hand, "sets out to uncover and build upon the positive (what is present or possible) rather than on the negative (what is missing or wrong)" (Flor, 2005, p. 85). In education, a Massachusetts school superintendent summarized the flaw of conventional problem solving at her school very well:

> Like many districts nationwide, West Springfield has traditionally approached school improvement, strategic planning, and increasing student achievement through a problem-solving process. But we realized that focusing on what was not working had a negative effect on school climate and student achievement. This deficit-based approach did not produce the positive, effective solutions we needed to move forward. Instead, planning sessions led by only a few district leaders often resulted in dry, lifeless documents that did not produce enthusiasm among district employees or for educa-

> tion in the community. (McKenzie, 2003, p. 37)

Cooperrider (2000) stated that, philosophically, "AI involves a decisive shift in Western intellectual tradition…The purpose of an inquiry…is the creation of 'generative theory', not so much mappings or explanations of yesterday's world, but anticipatory articulations of tomorrow's possibilities" (as cited in Carr-Stewart & Walker, 2003, p. 10).

Conventional problem solving and AI are shown in comparative form in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Problem-solving versus Appreciative Inquiry.

Problem Solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Identify the problem	Finding the best of what exists
↓	↓
Study the causes of the problem	Projecting what might be
↓	↓
Consider possible solutions	Determining what could be
↓	↓
Develop a plan to solve the problem	
↓	↓
Basic Assumption: An organization is a problem to be solved.	Basic Assumption: An organization is a mystery to be embraced.

Note: Based on *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change,* by Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

AI can be defined as a 4D process:

1. *Discover* the "best of what is" – inquire about what is working well
2. *Dream* "what might be" – discuss the possibilities for improvement
3. *Design* "what could be" – design the changes to be implemented
4. Create a *Destiny* based on "what will be" and let stakeholders participate in the creation of this destiny. (Kinni, 2003)

As stated on the AI website, "People are highly motivated by their own stories and images of success" (as cited in Carr-Stewart & Walker, 2003, p. 12). CEO of Green Mountain Coffee Roasters and AI practitioner Bob Stiller stated, "When you focus on what works and you dream of the possibilities, it's very inspiring to people" (Kinni, 2003).

Two Exploratory Studies

Two separate exploratory studies were done in the workplace and classroom environments, respectively. AI was originally developed to be used in the workplace. However, the authors wished to compare the similarities and usefulness of AI in both environments by conducting participant-observatory action research with the intent of discovering and applying the findings in order to improve classroom pedagogy.

Workplace Environment

The purpose of this component of our project was to be a participant-observer of AI among the employees in the first author's (Eric Bentkowski) retail workplace environment and to record the level of perceived positive impact upon work performance and/or attitudes toward the job and others. This was evidenced through the participants' Pre- and Post-Appreciative Inquiry survey responses, and through their [actual] responses to five AI open-ended questions.

Setting and Participants

The study took place at Payless Shoesource, Inc., in Waikiki, Hawai'i, where Eric works as the general manager. The workplace environment was suitable for our project because of its similarity and relevance to the classroom learning environment, as motivational factors affect performance in both environments. At Payless Shoesource, employees are taught, trained in, and certified on new skills, which they are required to learn, apply, and teach to other employees. This practice is congruent to teaching and motivating students in the classroom because teachers also teach, train, and evaluate how much and how well students learn and apply new skills, as well as how much and how well they can teach their peers.

The participants were two males and three females. One male was the district

manager, Eric's immediate supervisor, and the other male was a shift supervisor at the store. Two females were shift supervisors at the store with the other female being a new team member whose employment began one week prior to the project. The district manager was chosen because Eric wanted to observe the effects of AI on upper management. Eric communicated with the district manager on average twice a week. When extrapolated to the classroom environment, Eric would represent the role similar to that of a teacher and the district manager could symbolize the teacher's supervisor. The shift supervisors could represent students because Eric has direct influence on and contact with them regularly and is held accountable for their training and performance. The new team member was chosen because she had minimal experience with the other members. This team member could represent a new student in the classroom.

Materials

The Appreciative Inquiry Survey (Appendix A) was adopted as it was developed by Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, & Kaplin (2002). The Five AI questions (Appendix B) were created on the basis that focusing on positive behavior inspires higher performance (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003).

Procedures

Eric chose the five specific individuals who participated in the Appreciative Inquiry Survey (see Appendix A), which was given at the beginning and the end of the two-week time period. Additionally, the participants were asked five open-ended, appreciative inquiry questions (see Appendix B) at least twice a week for two weeks, individually and in a casual manner while on the job. For example, Eric was able to be a participant-observer as he asked the team members AI questions during training and daily interaction. He was able both to ask the AI questions and to observe the resulting behaviors. For example, at the beginning of the shift, before the team member went onto the sales floor, Eric asked Question #5: "What positive things have happened to you recently outside of work?" in order to lower the affective filter, to establish a good rapport and to assist the team member with focusing on something positive. Team members usually smiled as they talked about something positive other than work. The team members usually exhibited a higher energy level thereafter. They were more willing to share honest, deeper thoughts and feelings as the day went on, and as other AI questions were asked, they commented on feeling less stressed and having more fun at work.

Results

Based upon the Pre- and Post-Surveys and on the five AI questions asked of the participants in Eric's workplace environment, the results were encouraging but not overwhelmingly conclusive. There was not a significant difference in their responses between surveys, but the responses were very positive. Collectively, the Pre- Survey average was 4.04 of 5, and the Post- Survey average was 4.16 of 5, with 5 measuring the most positive response to AI. The minimal difference could have been due to the short amount of time between the surveys. However, it is worthy of note that the participants had a positive disposition toward AI. They all commented on how good they felt with this style of managing. One supervisor commented that she enjoyed coming to work more because she could look forward to the questions, which helped put her in a good mood no matter what kind of a day she was previously having. Eric also observed that this supervisor's sales performance numbers had a slight increase from the beginning of the project to the end. Collectively, the store had a positive overall sales gain for the two week period from July 16, 2006, to July 29, 2006. Specifically, for the week prior to the period of July 9, 2006 to July 15, 2006, the team delivered a -5.8% sales loss. The following week, July 16, 2006, to July 22, 2006, the team delivered a -1.2% sales loss. In the final week of July 23, 2006, to July 29, 2006, the team delivered a +9% sales gain. Given the many business factors related to the normal operations of the store,

we could not quantitatively measure how much of an impact AI's contribution made upon these sales gains, but we can speculate that since AI affected individual store members' motivation and performance, it could have had some kind of meaningful correlation to the sale increase. Through the five AI open-ended questions, Eric noted that the participants' attitudes, motivation, and performance on the job improved proportionately to the amount of AI interaction. For example, Eric spent more time with two supervisors, one male and one female, as a result of the number of hours they worked each week. They had more positive comments from customers and improved sales performances than the other two participants who worked significantly fewer hours than they did.

An interesting observation about the pre- and post- surveys is that the new female team member and the district manager both averaged 3.7 out of 5, while the three shift supervisors had 4.0, 4.6, and 4.8 out of 5, respectively. On the surface, one may interpret this as a result of the amount of time spent on active AI interaction on a regular basis with Eric. The three shift supervisors spent about two to three times the amount of AI interaction time, during the two week period, with Eric in comparison to the new team member and the district manager. Finally, a caveat: although all participants were informed that this survey did not affect anyone's employment status or position, it is possible that it was still implicitly perceived that way.

Classroom Environment

The purpose of this component of our project was to do a cross-sectional survey of one ESL class to compare students' perceptions of their language abilities based on AI-based questions versus problem-focused questions. Do AI questions affect students' self-images of their language learning ability? If so, what effect does it have, and what can teachers do with these results?

Setting and Participants

For the second component of our project, the second author (Marshall Yamaga) administered two surveys at Academia Language School in Honolulu, Hawaii, where he works as an ESL teacher. The class consisted of 13 intermediate-level ESL students from four different countries; seven students were from Japan, three students were from Korea, two students were from Taiwan, and one student was from Thailand.

Materials

While both student surveys contained five questions each, the first survey contained AI questions, and the second contained problem-focused questions. The first survey (see Appendix C) consisted of AI questions and attempted to draw out the highlights of the students' pasts and hopefully directed them towards positive feelings of bright and possible futures, which is what Appreciative Inquiry is all about. Since there was no existing set of AI-oriented questions to be used with ESL students, the second author constructed the action research survey based on the principles of AI. The first three questions of the AI survey (Appendix C) were designed so that students would focus on positive experiences in their learning (e.g., "What are some good experiences you had while speaking English?" and "What classroom exercises have helped you improve your English?"). The second survey (Appendix D) was then constructed with non-appreciative questions to contrast with the first survey and contained questions such as "Have you had any bad experiences while speaking English?" and "What are some difficult things about learning English? The final two questions on both surveys were identical, and they were aimed at eliciting the students' self-assessments of their English proficiency. The purpose of this action research was to discover whether questions presented in an Appreciative Inquiry format corresponded to higher self-perceptions of English speaking ability.

Procedures

The students were randomly selected; seven students received the Appreciative Inquiry Survey, and six students received the problem-focused survey. Five females and two males took the Appreciative Inquiry survey,

and four females and two males took the problem-focused survey. Both surveys were done anonymously, so nationality data will not be considered.

Results

Students taking the Appreciative Inquiry Survey scored themselves an average of 5.4/10 on question #5 (which asked students to rate their language ability), while students taking the problem-focused survey scored themselves an average of only 3.0/10.

Although this survey was not conclusive due to its small scale, the students who were asked the Appreciative Inquiry questions rated their English speaking ability 25% higher than the students who took the problem-focused questionnaire, and it is possible that the students' higher scores were based on the fact that they *perceived* themselves as better English speakers. The AI Survey results showed that for this small group of students, questions presented in an Appreciative Inquiry format did correlate to a higher rating in a student's perception of his/her English speaking ability. Whether the students' perceptions of their speaking ability will carry over into their actual performance will require a longitudinal study and is beyond the scope of this survey. However, the difference in scores gives us a feeling of empowerment – that the students' positive attitudes toward their ESL studies can be nurtured and encouraged to grow.

Discussion

Appreciative Inquiry has been shown to motivate performance by *discovering* "what works well," and then *dreaming* of "what might be." (Kinni, 2003) As these students went through these first two steps, they were able to remember and celebrate some good experiences which hopefully may motivate them to help other students because of their growing confidence. Appreciative Inquiry puts students in the mode of learning positively and brings excitement and anticipation into lessons. As students look forward to the positive reinforcement they receive in the classroom, they will/may realize that Appreciative Inquiry questions are an open invitation to a better conversation. Finally, the last two phases of the AI formula (*designing* "what could be," then working toward their *destiny* of "what will be") (Kinni, 2003) could be collaboratively done between the teacher and the student to help each other design and produce activities that encourage the student's positive growth. In the classroom, instead of focusing on error correction, teachers can focus on what students are doing right and then lead them positively toward areas that need more awareness. For example, if a student makes errors with prepositions but uses adjectives very well, a teacher can ask positive AI questions such as: "How do you feel about adjectives?" and "What is something positive about your use of adjectives?" to bring out the student's strengths. Then, the teacher might follow-up with: "How can you tie in your success with adjectives and use them with prepositions?" Within the classroom, Appreciative Inquiry is successful because it creates a positive learning environment. Outside of the classroom, students are sure to experience frustrations and shortcomings as they try to use their second language. Using Appreciative Inquiry inside the classroom helps students to refocus on their positive language successes and helps teachers build up their students according to their students' needs.

Conclusion

We have observed in both workplace and classroom environments that Appreciative Inquiry improves self-esteem, builds self-confidence, motivates and empowers individuals toward better performance, and inspires a greater probability that they will share and apply their learning and insights with those they build relationships with because AI focuses on past successes and generates positive thinking and feelings about the possibilities yet to be manifested. As Cooperrider (2000) stated, Appreciative Inquiry is a shift in western intellectual analysis of group dynamics. As groups are comprised of many individuals, so too can AI be applied at the individual (student) level to help them discover, dream, design, and ful-

fill their destiny in today's ESL classroom. As we share and apply AI to empower and build others up, we may cultivate relationships with those with greater, far-reaching influence, which can impact the world in which we live. This resonates with an old wisdom, "He who loves with a pure heart and whose speech is gracious will have the king for his friend" (Proverbs 22:11, NIV). In AI terms, the authors agree with Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, and Kaplin (2002) that "if you truly wish to change your world, you must change your way of asking questions. It could be that the moment you do so, a totally different world will take shape around you" (p. x).

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Appendix A

Appreciative Inquiry Survey at Work

Appreciative Inquiry is asking positive questions to individuals that encourage positive thinking. Whitney, Cooperrider, Trosten-Bloom, and Kaplin (2002) wrote that performance is enhanced when questions help others recall their high performance patterns.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your answers will be kept confidential.

Please use the following scales below to answer the questions of this survey:

1-Very Low	2-Low	3-Normal	4-High	5-Very High
1-Highly Disagree	2-Disagree	3-Neither	4-Agree	5-Highly Agree

____ 1. Please rate the amount of appreciative inquiry you receive at work daily.

____ 2. It is important to receive appreciative inquiry at work.

____ 3. I feel more energized and more productive when I receive appreciative inquiry at work.

____ 4. I want to use and share appreciative inquiry with my co-workers or supervisor after I receive appreciative inquiry from someone else.

____ 5. I enjoy my job more and learn more when there is appreciative inquiry.

____ 6. I am productive, creative, and innovative at work

____ 7. How much does appreciative inquiry motivate you to do a better job without supervision?

____ 8. How much appreciative inquiry have you used with someone else at work?

____ 9. If you have used appreciative inquiry with a co-worker or supervisor, please rate the level of positive change that resulted.

____ 10. Appreciative inquiry improves my work performance.

Appendix B

Five Open-ended Appreciative Inquiry Questions

1. What good experiences or interactions have you had at work today?
2. What has helped you improve your interactions with customers, team members or supervisor?
3. How have you maintained your wonderful, positive attitude at work today?
4. What are two goals that you feel good about accomplishing today?
5. What positive things have happened to you recently outside of work?

Appendix C

Language Learning Questionnaire #1

1. What are some good experiences you had while speaking English?
2. What has helped you improve your English the most?
3. What classroom exercises have helped you improve your English?
4. Do you think you are a good English speaker? Why/Why Not?
5. Please give yourself an English speaking score:
   (poor speaker → 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ←good speaker)

Appendix D

Language Learning Questionnaire #2

1. Have you had any bad experiences while speaking in English?
2. What are some difficult things about learning English?
3. What classroom exercises have been the most difficult?
4. Do you think you are a good English speaker? Why/Why Not?
5. Please give yourself an English speaking score:
   (poor speaker → 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 ←good speaker)