

APPRECIATIVE PEDAGOGY: CONSTRUCTING POSITIVE MODELS FOR LEARNING

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Over the years, we have witnessed the emergence of various approaches for improving the relevance and effectiveness of management education. One guiding principle that has gained almost universal acceptance among management faculty is what is generally known as *experiential learning*. Experience-centered pedagogical approaches espouse a common value. They regard students' experience as relevant and valuable. They acknowledge the usefulness of students' experience as a wellspring of insight into organizational life, an interesting focus of reflection, and a credible source of guidance for action and experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

However, the potential range of experiences to allow into or to create in the classroom can be overwhelming in quantity, variety, and richness. Similar to a child in a candy store with limited time and a deluge of rich experiences, the professor must choose the experiences to make figural for the day. How can we make our choices more deliberate, reflecting our mission of helping students to learn new skills, competencies, and knowledge?

Appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, 1990), a recent framework for action in organizational development, has proven provocative and useful to us in addressing this question. This approach to organizational change has stimulated a variety of insights and exercises that we will call *appreciative pedagogy* (AP). The next section presents a brief description of appreciative

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inquiry. We will then describe AP, how we have used it in the classroom, and its impact on the quality of the learning process.

What is Appreciative Inquiry?

Appreciative inquiry is a macro-organizational approach to organizational development developed by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987) at Case Western Reserve University's Department of Organizational Behavior. AI focuses on the generative potential of positive images, which Cooperrider (1990) called "anticipatory realities" (p. 96). He argued that positive images (ideals and vision) have a "heliotropic effect"; that is, they energize and orient human behavior toward the realization of the ideal. Similar to a plant that grows in the direction of the light source, an organization strives to grow toward the positive image held by its members, steadily transformed from what it is into what it can be. A clear common image of the ideal organization provides substantial energy and direction for focused and sustained creative action.

What is the source of positive image? Cooperrider (1990) suggested that this image should be drawn from both people's accumulated experiences of the best of what is (i.e., their peak experiences and moments of heightened energy, success, and pride) and from an understanding of the life-giving forces, success factors, people, processes, and arrangements that helped. These experiences contain the threads with which organizational members can weave a common dream—the positive image of what can be.

As an OD strategy, appreciative inquiry relies heavily on the social process of inquiry and joint discovery. Usually carried out by organizational members themselves through face-to-face interviews, the process legitimizes everyone's curiosity about what works for self and others and allows the unveiling of each other's peak experiences. For example, one of the authors and another consultant conducted appreciative interviews with 20 members of the Ohio International Organization (OHIO). Based on that experience, those 20 then interviewed the remaining 100 members. Everyone involved in the interviews reported being energized and having positive reactions.

Appreciative inquiry eventually leads into the process of collaboratively envisioning the best that we can be. After the discovery and valuing of the best here and now, the process moves toward the search for new possibilities, for new arrangements, for new paradigms, and for new processes. Through dialogue, people share different facets of possible realities that have so far resided in their imaginations. Conversations help to facilitate the appreciation and creation of a common image, a common vision of the ideal organ-

ization. At OHIO, a task force identified common themes and tentative categories from the interview data. These were presented to everyone at a large session to verify their accuracy and then to build provocative propositions for the organization. Because this process remains focused on individual experiences, the emerging common vision is, thus, well grounded in reality. Individual appreciation can become collective appreciation, and individual will can become collective will.

Finally, appreciative inquiry, through collective will, helps to make the vision a reality. Innovative and creative arrangements become attractive and useful experiments to try. An action plan becomes an exciting blueprint for action, for giving birth to the vision. Again, because the positive image, the ideal vision, is grounded in people's realities, they have a level of confidence to try and make it real. At OHIO, groups were convened to plan the implementation of the propositions that they had all generated. One of the innovative ideas generated by these groups was to encourage the use of the FreeNet (which later became known as the Cleveland FreeNet), an e-mail technology that facilitated easy and inexpensive communication among OHIO members scattered across the state.

In its stance toward organizations, appreciative inquiry argues that energy tends to be heightened and more productively invested when directed toward discovery of what works rather than what does not work—for what works contains the seed that might transform. Appreciative inquiry puts into constructive practice what Bennis (1995) called "management of attention." Rather than attending to what is not working, organizational members explore what works well.

Appreciative Pedagogy: Appreciative Inquiry in the Classroom

Appreciative pedagogy is a pedagogical adaptation of appreciative inquiry. Primarily, AP enacts in the learning endeavor AI's basic beliefs, values, and social inquiry process. These include the following.

Bias for experiences of success. Similar to AI, appreciative pedagogy trusts in, celebrates, and deliberately seeks out students' experiences of success and moments of high energy and great pride. The practice of AP is guided by the belief that students come with a rich array of positive experiences in such varied areas as work, organizations, relationships, teams, or leadership.

Valuing success as the building block of positive vision. AP actively seeks to discover and celebrate students' experiences of success because of a basic belief that such experiences can be the compelling basis of positive visions of possibility. The experience of success grounds the ideal on what is subjectively real, fulfilling, and energizing rather than on the subjectively distant, often filtered narratives of "best practices" in some famous and often quite unfamiliar corporate realities.

Belief in the profound connection between positive vision and positive action. AP is grounded in the belief that there is a profound and necessary connection between positive image and positive action. AP thus sees as a primary task the generation of positive images as a requisite for energizing positive action. The AP practitioner is aware that mistakes or problems often demand attention because they can be sources of frustration, pain, or loss. However, AP argues that positive vision is what best energizes and guides positive action, one that is generative and creative rather than avoidance oriented.

Valuing social (face-to-face) inquiry. AP sees the classroom as an opportunity for students to give vent to their curiosity and discover the successes of their classmates. Appreciative pedagogy achieves this through a number of critical steps. First, AP requires deliberate inquiry into and sharing of students' experiences of success and moments of great energy and pride. As in AI, inquiry is elevated to a social experience through face-to-face interviewing and conversation.

AP as an adaptation of AI is not merely copying, however. The classroom reality differs in several important ways from a large organization. The ongoing organization is tied to an environment in short- and long-term ways. Common vision and collective action are critical to organizational survival. The classroom is temporary and is relatively closed to its environment. Although the appreciative inquiry process positively affects the learning culture of the classroom, the primary focus of the teachers' and students' effort remains more short-term and limited to self and, perhaps, to the small group. This does, fortunately, allow shorter time frames. AP can happen in 20-minute segments, 3-hour activities, or entire courses. Also, because all are present, AP is able to involve everyone in the process of generating and working the data.

In the next sections, we will discuss how AP provided us with a framework for identifying and highlighting student's learning experiences, for extolling peak experiences as potential models of effective behavior, and for clarifying concepts and models in both undergraduate and MBA organizational

behavior classes. We will conclude by describing the impact AP had on our learning community and the quality of our experience in the classroom.

Appreciative Pedagogy in Daily Activities

Appreciative pedagogy facilitates the exploration and creation of positive realities in the classroom on a daily basis. As the semester unfolds, AP guides the professor to make conscious and positively oriented decisions as to what material to use and what aspects of student experiences to tap and highlight. Several examples of applying an appreciative twist to standard assignments and in-class activities may help to illuminate this point.

Teams. Questions of what makes an effective team are addressed in many writings and possible lectures. It is possible to begin the exploration of such topics in a more inductive manner by guiding the students in an appreciative inquiry of their own experience. We have experimented with the process of building learning teams by asking students to focus on teams or groups that they remember with happiness, pride, and a sense of accomplishment. As an ungraded assignment, they must create two lists: their peak experiences in those groups and the key forces and factors that helped make these peak experiences happen.

Working from their lists, students in small groups report their respective peak experiences and facilitating factors. We encourage them to be curious and to ask probing questions of each other to clarify and obtain very specific descriptions of these events and the forces that made them occur. From this discussion, each small group is required to brainstorm and generate their ideal image of a great work team, with specific statements of team characteristics reflective of data from their earlier conversation. A plenary session follows the small-group discussions, and groups report to the rest of the class about the components of a great and successful team. The professor writes down these characteristics on the board, oftentimes using some preestablished categories (e.g., people and tasks) for organizing the rich data that often comes from the students. After hearing all the reports, each finalizes their vision of an ideal team based on what they have generated and heard. Groups are encouraged to add characteristics to their description of the ideal team based on the reports by other groups. Finally, we have asked students to brainstorm and identify ways to make their own team become similar to their ideal.

During this activity, the professor ensures that discussions focus on identifying peak experiences and life-giving forces. The conversation should not

dwell on stories of failure. Meticulously, the professor would not even allow speculation of failure avoided. The class is kept focused on the best of what is rather than what is not present.

Best manager. At some point early in the semester, we have also encouraged students to think about their vision of an ideal manager and to determine some of the competencies needed to become this ideal manager. The process continues with students building a composite image from experiences of their best managers. Depending on time and purposes, this data can be processed and shared in a variety of ways. Small groups could discuss and report, and the class could build a model of competencies, skills, and attitudes from all the reports. We have also asked small groups to elect a speaker to give a short talk incorporating their ideal image as the company's "Manager of the Year." We conclude with some discussions on action steps to find out where we (both professor and students) stand relative to these ideals and how to move to where we want to be.

As the students report, the professor is vigilant that students describe each characteristic or competence in a constructive and positive manner. Descriptive statements such as "does not look over your shoulders all the time" gets probed immediately and reoriented. For instance, the professor may ask the reporting student and group: "What does your manager do instead that makes her so great?" Probing questions such as this help to refocus the conversation on what is rather than what is not there.

The excellent organization. Another area of potential learning and interest to students is the nature of an excellent organization. We have capitalized on this curiosity by showing a video of some excellent companies (e.g., 3M or Southwest Airlines). We ask the students to pay attention to language, relationships, or behavior patterns that illustrate the excellence of this organization. At the end of the video presentation, we ask students to compile a list of factors that make the organization great. Again, as students report the results of their observations, we have been very careful that descriptions are about what is rather than what is not there.

Organizational theory. In a far more extensive application, Cooperrider (personal communication, May 1, 1997) used the appreciative inquiry model to underlie an entire organizational theory course. After some training and examples, students are asked to conduct appreciative interviews of their own organizations. For example, using the 7-S model (Pascale & Athos, 1981), students might look for instances of where the strategy or structure has

supported great achievements or excellent communication. This data would then be used to construct models of organizations at their best.

Managerial interview. A managerial interview is a very useful activity for most undergraduates. Many have never even talked to a person in their major field of study. This simple exposure is beneficial. By adding several questions, however, we can turn this experience into an appreciative inquiry. For example, the student may ask the manager to remember a time of peak performance on the job and further inquire about the various factors that contributed to the performance (system, self, etc.). Another useful area for inquiry has to do with times that members of the manager's work group were motivated to perform at a level beyond the call of duty. In both cases, it is possible for both the student and the manager to learn something useful about performance and motivation.

Presentations. One last example of a performance focus may also be helpful. Group presentations are great opportunities for students to work on a variety of skills (teamwork and public speaking), to learn through teaching, and to better understand the nature of the classroom. Although many useful materials are available to help students, we can also begin by examining our own experience of presentations and classes that really worked for us. With this data, we build a positive image to work toward. Students learn to be aware of the audience and become designers of a learning situation.

The aforementioned examples illustrate a few opportunities for the application of AP in daily classroom activities. A few simple questions can help further extend AP. Can we give students opportunities to read about what works well? Can assignments give students opportunities to experiment, practice, and reflect on what works well, and do they encourage the students to stretch to their highest level? Do our performance evaluations give students a sense of how much they have accomplished?

Any one of the earlier examples or questions might be a useful starting point for an initial experiment in AP. Whether trying one or several or designing an entire course using AP, it is important to embody the root values and to properly model the process. When attempting AP, we suggest that faculty members:

1. stay focused on inquiring into the success stories of students;
 - a. even when students bring up problems, guide their attention to what worked in seemingly problematic situations (what let the team stay together in spite of problems?—appreciating the problem);

- b. stay with students' frustration when they are blocked due to a lack of formal work experience and help to redirect their search to experiences that connect with the basic meanings of the topic at hand;
2. highlight factors that made things work;
3. identify the skills and know-how needed to repeat successful episodes;
4. encourage students to focus on developing a few skills and acquiring the knowledge critical to success.

In these ways and through the deliberate surfacing of our own and students' experiences of success and peak performance, we will unleash the heliotropic power of positive imagery toward positive action.

Consequences of Appreciative Pedagogy

Appreciative pedagogy is a useful tool in tackling the mainstream content and activities of a typical organizational behavior or management class. However, additional benefits normally flow from this process of learning and relating to others. We believe that AP has generated a number of healthy outcomes for our students. Some are immediate, and some are cumulative.

1. We have observed more energized and sustained interactions. In contrast to the difficult moments of pulling out responses after a lecture, we are sometimes faced with the question of when or whether to proceed to the next step due to the high energy level.
2. Students feel a sense of safety when publicly speaking up; they experience less fear and inhibition. The positive focus honors their experiences. When asked, "How did that go?", students often respond in the following ways: "This made it easy to talk to someone about my best performances," "I could talk for hours about my proudest moments," or "When I talk about failures, I cover up many facts, even from myself."
3. A fuller and hopeful view of the future (images of what they can be) emerges versus an empty view (what they should not be). With all this focus on the positive, many wonder what happens to negative experience. After all, life is not all roses. We believe that although negative experience may be useful in drawing attention to important issues, we ultimately learn best from what works well. Many part-time MBAs have had negative experiences in their organizations and in reaction to misguided change efforts. They feel frustrated at the constraints to initiative and growth and the many subtle signs of disrespect they sense. Their anger is rooted in the fact that they have been hopeful and have expected better. Those who have begun to believe that nothing else is possible in any organization are truly amazed to hear from classmates who love their jobs and bosses, who are challenged and empowered, and who believe themselves to be in great organizations. They begin to wonder if maybe they could work in such a place or maybe carve out such a space right now. Some management in-

novations have actually worked. This kernel of possibility allows them to proceed, sometimes skeptically, with the work of the course. Some skepticism proves useful in deepening the learning process in ways that blind conversion may not.

4. Concepts and insights are personally meaningful and relevant because they are firmly rooted in personal experiences. Reports from subgroups are, in essence, live cases that can be used to springboard into various discussions. Furthermore, topical coverage is rarely an issue. We have often found that lists generated by undergraduates in very brief activities contain 90% of the material reported by experts. This can help alleviate the distrust that some have of experts and book-learning. This item and Number 2 lead us to our fifth observation.
5. Students have gained a greater trust in self and heightened confidence in their experience. Participation seems better. This is fragile, of course, because years of school have convinced many that the answers come from the book or the teacher.
6. Students begin to gain skill and confidence in appreciative inquiry as a creative alternative to objective analysis or problem solving. Problem solving is a powerful activity that we believe works best in the context of AI. Going right to the problem often leaves us in the frame of reference that we started with. Focusing on what was great and building a positive vision will often reframe the context of the problem and ultimately transform the system. In addition, AI taps into the resource of personal experience and is sustained by the conviction of that experience as well as the positive image. Approaching life as a miracle to be experienced rather than a problem to be solved is a dramatic and useful shift in perspective.
7. A positive attitude toward other students as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and real develops. AP helps to move the class through early stages of development and provides a foundation for a healthy and productive culture to emerge. Many students eagerly report that they have had very similar experiences. There is surprise in discovering common ground with a stranger or a new dimension of or insight into a friend. This deepens the conviction of the life-giving forces they uncovered but also begins a bonding or identification with the other and the class as a whole. In contrast with both the traditional lecture culture and the initial wariness we all have of strangers and new situations, others become real. They come into focus as they listen, connect, show support, and work as a partner.
8. We are not fully certain, but some initial feedback, including formal reviews, indicates a positive attitude toward the professor as resource, guide, and helper.

There have also been positive consequences for us, the professors, when we have managed our classes with an appreciative stance. Certainly the aforementioned outcomes (e.g., positive attitude and greater energy, participation, and interaction) make our teaching more enjoyable and easier. Practically, we have found it easier to guide students to develop their competencies because of the tighter connection with personal experience.

We have also enjoyed the steady flow of success stories brought by students. This fresh material has stimulated our learning and has led to a deeper, more grounded connection with the values, concepts, and models we teach. Finally, their "Aha!" experiences, the discovery of something valuable, have renewed our hope and belief that we are on the right track.

For both our students and us, the appreciative mindset has been a positive force in the classroom. It awakens the desire and nurtures the curiosity to create and discover new possibilities that can enrich our existence in class and give it new meaning and direction. We have found the appreciative mindset to be a positive force for all members of the classroom learning community. We hope and believe that a range of activities rooted in this mindset will increase the likelihood of experiencing other current and future situations in an appreciative way.

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