

Appreciative Inquiry: An Experiential Exercise and Course Feedback Tool

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Abstract

The action research method of appreciative inquiry (AI) was employed to develop a teaching tool. This exercise involves students' reflections on a course, noting when they learned the most. The AI process of appreciating, envisioning, dialoging, and innovating is used to help students reflect on how they learn. Instructors of all types of courses at both the undergraduate and master's degree levels gain understanding of student learning and ideas on how to improve courses. The exercise and sample responses from students are provided to demonstrate how the exercise works. Three variations are presented: mapping the exercise onto Kolb's learning styles, running the exercise at the midpoint of a course, and a case study of an AI implementation in an organization.

Keywords

appreciative inquiry, experiential exercise, learning styles

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is an organizational development (OD) intervention that is an example of action research. Action research is the process of problem specification and then interventions (i.e., actions) until the researcher understands how the intervention is affecting the organization.

AI is "a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action which are designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organization, or society as a whole" (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 159). The assumption is that

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people move in the direction they visualize for the future. Rather than focusing on problems to be solved, people are asked to focus on positive images of the future. By reflecting on their individual peak (best) experiences, they can then visualize what could be in the future.

AI is relevant to both educators and students because it focuses on the positives in the learning process. However, AI goes beyond this because it leads to greater understanding of “positive forces” that underlie systematic change. People are asked to visualize what the future could be like if they had more of their appreciated, peak experiences. For educators, this is important, since the inquiry process leads to empowerment of students to shape their own learning experience. This is important to students as well since they are not treated as passive recipients of knowledge but become architects of their own learning process. Peak learning experiences are often experiential, and this supports the trend of incorporating more activities into the classroom (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

The exercise described in this article provides an experiential learning experience. By treating the class experience like an organization as suggested by the classroom as organization model (Cohen, 1976; Gardner & Larson, 1988; Sheehan, McDonald, & Spence, 2009), students reflect on what they learned in a course and how they best learned it. The exercise works with both undergraduates and master’s students with work experience. Master’s students (including executive MBA students) are intrigued by the process and are interested in applying the technique in their own organizations to bring about positive organizational change.

Learning Objectives

After completing this activity, students are able to do the following:

- Understand how appreciative inquiry works
- Analyze information generated by appreciative inquiry
- Comprehend the types of activities where they learn best based on their learning styles
- Apply appreciative inquiry in organizational settings by discussing a case study (optional)

Activity Summary of AI Used in the Classroom

Participants begin the AI process by reflecting on individual peak experiences and then engaging in conversation about them with others in a group setting. Follow-up questions are asked regarding why the experience was positive. Individual reflections on the peak experience are then linked to develop a shared meaning for the group. The AI process follows the following steps (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987):

1. Appreciating—valuing the best of what there is
2. Envisioning—what might be?

3. Dialoguing—what should be?
4. Innovating—what will be?

Students are encouraged to tell stories that identify what is “good” in the classroom, providing a platform from which to move toward new action. The focus on what is good is then extended, through appreciation. Appreciation raises consciousness of what is positive and valuable in an educational experience. Dialoging and innovating are encouraged by having students engage in small group discussions to envision their views of how learning should be and develop ideas for new classroom activities.

Instructions

The AI process is presented first in a 5-minute lecture. For example AI is described in Ludema and Mohr’s (2003) book, *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A Practitioner’s Guide for Leading Large-Group Change*. The AI exercise applies the methods of AI to the learning experiences in courses. Following the steps of the AI process, students are asked to do the following:

1. Reflect on the entire course experience and write down what they found to be “peak” learning experiences
2. Envision what learning would be like if it was always like the peak experiences
3. Meet in small groups of four to six to discuss their peak experiences—to dialogue about them with others; this step is important because through the process of sharing experiences, the “multiple, simultaneous, construction process” builds consensus on what the realities of the experiences were and why they were the best learning processes—a shared mental model (van der Haar & Hosking, 2004)
4. Develop suggestions for how the course could be revised to have more of these types of experiences by generating three wishes for how learning could always be the way they experienced as most positive

The exercise uses questions that are variations of the AI questions. They are shown in Appendix A.

The exercise takes about 45 minutes (this may vary by class size):

1. Describe AI and the exercise—5 minutes
2. Students complete AI questions—10 minutes
3. Students meet in small groups to discuss peak learning experiences—20 minutes
4. Students report on their group’s suggestions for how the course could be revised to have more of these types of experiences—10 minutes
5. Note: Instructors should plan an additional 15 to 20 minutes if a case study is used as a follow-up to show the application of AI in an organizational setting. The case study is described in the section on “Variations.”

Debriefing the Activity

Following the activity, the example responses are summarized and are distributed to the students as a handout (refer to the supplemental material, available online at <http://mtr.sagepub.com/supplemental>, for an example of how to present this summary). Students discuss the results in small groups and develop suggestions for designing more activities like their peak learning experiences. This exercise demonstrates the usefulness of AI to an experience students can relate to—the class they are taking.

Discussion Questions

To facilitate the discussion, questions are posed to the students. Alternatively, the questions can be assigned as a written assignment and discussed in the next class meeting. Some examples of discussion questions are as follows:

1. What did you learn about yourself from the AI exercise?
2. What did you learn about how you learn best?
3. What did you learn about other students?
4. What new things did you learn about _____? (Insert the topics related to the lesson content, for example personality tests? negotiation? brainstorming?)
5. How could you use AI as a manager to learn about how your employees learn, what they like about their work, and what motivates them? (optional)

Example of AI Exercise Results

The exercise has been conducted in undergraduate courses four times at a private, southeastern university. The exercise was run at the end of the semester during the module on leading organizational change.

Excerpts from the most popular learning experiences are shown in Table 1: personality tests, a negotiation role-play, and a brainstorming exercise. Additional learning experiences that were generated by the AI activity are provided in supplemental material for this article (available online at <http://mtr.sagepub.com/supplemental>). As can be seen in the table, the process generates a great deal of information; for simplicity of presentation, sample comments from students are provided for three learning experiences. Comments indicated that students valued experiential activities such as the brainstorming task because it helped them learn the concepts covered in lectures. In visualizing for the future, students clearly indicated a preference for more activities where they could practice creativity, and they wanted learning to be activity-based and not lecture-based.

Variations

This section describes three variations that instructors might adopt.

Table 1. Examples of Student Comments From Appreciative Inquiry Exercise.

	What happened?	Description	What was learned	Three wishes
Personality tests	These tests tell you a lot about yourself and force you to consider how certain aspects of your personality and morals make you more fit for certain workplace over others. ^a	It was really cool to see things about myself (from the results) that I never really noticed. ^a	I learned that it would be great to come out of each other's bubble and discuss what other people feel or like. ^a I learned that certain jobs I previously thought I could be a good match for did not necessarily fit my personality. ^b	Learning sticks much more when its personal. ^a We were all personally involved in these activities, which always improves learning. ^a Learn only about interesting things ^b Wish that professors have more group projects teamwork ^a
Negotiation simulation	It was a real-world situation that I will encounter in the present and in the future. I was able to interact and learn techniques on negotiating. ^a	We were given a scenario about an agent and a branded company, where I had to negotiate with the agent to get the soccer player to get sponsored by our company. ^a	I learned that negotiating is very difficult and it's important to have a strategy before going into a negotiation. ^a I learned different negotiating skills and ways to achieve my goals ^b	Learn real life skills ^b More practical "hands-on" simulations would help to better understand new topics. ^c
	The ability to practice negotiation skills in a simulated "real" negotiation was value and helped me to understand which techniques will be most effective for me in the future. ^c		In the class preceding the simulation, we were taught many negotiation techniques and strategies. During the simulation I learned which of these strategies were most effective for me personally ^c	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

	What happened?	Description	What was learned	Three wishes
Brainstorming	When coming up with the different uses for the items we choose, real team building occurred. Everyone had fun throwing out ideas and we all laughed and smiled together. It made the team feel like a family. ^a	From a seemingly random assortment of objects, each group chose two. From there, we moved on to brainstorming many uses for these objects and convinced the class as to which is best. ^b	I learned that not everything is as simple as it seems and that sometimes crazy ideas end up being the best ideas. ^a	Make learning activity based instead of lecture based ^a
	It was a very realistic example of a brainstorming session and was a great example of many of the aspects we had previously discussed in the notes ^b		I learned how brainstorming sessions go, along with the concepts of group-think group dynamics, and do on ^b I learned to be more creative and look at objects in new ways and to be able to brainstorm without fear of being judged for my ideas ^c	Creative means to demonstrate class concepts ^b I wish that it always required creative thinking ^c

^aPerson 1. ^bPerson 2. ^cPerson 3.

AI and Kolb's Learning Styles

The students might complete the Kolb Learning Style Inventory as part of the course and then relate their responses on the AI exercises to the four types of learning and resulting learning styles (A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2013; D. A. Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). The four types of learning are as follows:

1. Concrete experience (CE)—students learn from a new experience or situation, or they reinterpret an existing experience (feeling).
2. Reflective Observation (RO)—students reflect on a new experience, noting inconsistencies between experience and understanding (watching).
3. Abstract Conceptualization (AC)—students reflect on an experience which results in a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept (thinking).
4. Active Experimentation (AE)—students apply what they have learned to the world around them to see what happens (doing).

These four types of learning represent a cycle of learning from experience. Effective learning occurs when the student progresses through the four stages: (1) having a concrete experience followed by (2) observation of and reflection on that experience, which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions), which are then (4) used to test hypotheses in future situations, resulting in new experiences.

The four learning styles are the following (D. A. Kolb, 1984):

- *Diverging*—reliance on CE and RO (feel and watch)
- *Assimilating*—reliance on AC and RO (think and watch)
- *Converging*—reliance on AC and AE (think and do)
- *Accommodating*—reliance on CE and AE (feel and do)

Appendix B provides a detailed description of how the Kolb learning styles could be related to the sample student responses on the AI exercise in Table 1. Mapping the Kolb learning styles onto the responses from the AI exercise enables students to learn about their own styles and understand learning styles by providing concrete examples of learning styles in practice.

Running the Exercise at the Midpoint of the Course

The exercise could be run at the midpoint of the course. In this variation, students are assigned the task of creating another learning experience similar to the ones they viewed as most effective. An additional benefit of running the exercise at the midpoint of a course is that instructors receive feedback and can “course correct,” by adding more experiences that are similar to the ones that emerge from the AI activity.

Organizational Example

An extended discussion can follow the exercise on how AI is used in organizational settings to bring about transformational change. To accomplish this, a follow-up mini case study of how AI is applied to an organizational setting can be discussed. A case study of an AI application conducted by Green Mountain Coffee may be found at <https://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/ppGreenMountain.cfm>.

Conclusion

This exercise provides an instructor with valuable insight and suggestions for improving a course that go beyond the information provided in standard teaching evaluations. The suggestions generated by the students provide rich information on how best to design experiences that students will learn best from and will remember in the future. Additional benefits to the instructor are an in-depth analysis of what teaching techniques students feel help them learn best. As a result of the AI exercise, I have incorporated more self-assessments each week in my courses (e.g., a self-assessment that has students rate their own perseverance). Another example is that I have incorporated more creative team activities, for example, the Marshmallow Challenge, which can be found at <http://www.tomwujec.com/design-projects/marshmallow-challenge/>.

The AI method is consistent with positive psychology and designed to evoke positive emotions (Bright & Miller, 2012). Thus, a limitation of using AI for this purpose is that it will tend to produce only positive responses. One extension of this work might be to ask students examples of when they learned the least. This is not consistent with the AI method but might produce comparative results.

From this exercise, instructors will learn about what experiences help students learn best making the AI exercise a useful input to course development. At the same time, students learn what AI is, and how it might be used in organizational settings (this can be reinforced by adding discussion of an organizational case study as a follow-up to the activity). Experiencing AI firsthand is an excellent way to teach this valuable OD technique.

Appendix A

Appreciative Inquiry Exercise

Think back on this course and the learning experiences that you participated in. Choose one that you think was a great learning experience. After completing this form, form a small group with other students and discuss your experiences. Develop some suggestions for your professor to implement in future classes.

1. What happened that made it a great learning experience?
2. Describe the experience.
3. What did you learn?
4. What three wishes do you have that would make learning always like this?

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Appendix B

Examples of Kolb's Learning Styles and AI Peak Experiences

Kolb's model presents four learning styles.

1. The *diverging* style comprises of Concrete Experience (CE) and Reflective Observation (RO). People with this learning style are best at viewing a task creatively from diverse perspectives. These individuals might, for example, learn best from the "brainstorming" activity. Examples of these learning styles can be found in the examples shown in Table 1. Person 1 describes what they learned from the brainstorming activity this way: "I learned that not everything is as simple as it seems and that sometimes crazy ideas end up being the best ideas."
2. The *assimilating* style comprises Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Reflective Observation (RO). People with this learning style are best at organizing large amounts of data into concise and logical reports. In class, students with the assimilating style prefer reading and lectures. So they might report that they learn best by analyzing information and thinking through solutions to problems such as for a case study. For example, Person 2 wrote this when asked what could happen for learning to always be this way: "Learn only about interesting things."
3. The *converging* style comprises Abstract Conceptualization (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE). Converging students are good at coming up with practical uses for ideas. They may prefer to deal with technical aspects of assignments and may learn best from simulations. For example, Person 1 wrote this about the negotiation simulation: "I learned that negotiating is very difficult and it's important to have a strategy before going into a negotiation."
4. The *accommodating* style comprises Concrete Experience (CE) and Active Experimentation (AE). People with this learning style learn best from directly experiencing something. Individuals with an accommodating learning style rely on others for information rather than their own analysis. In class, students who are accommodating like to work with others and may learn best from fieldwork or case studies. An example of this learning style is the response of Person 2 on the negotiation exercise: "More practical 'hands-on' simulations would help to better understand new topics."

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Supplemental Material

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