

## Applying an Appreciative Inquiry Process to a Course Evaluation in Higher Education

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While appreciative inquiry (AI) has its origins in organizational development, this article considers the application of AI within a course evaluation in higher education. An AI process was deemed appropriate given its concern for peak performance or *life-centric* experiences. Former students of a particular course, along with current students, engaged in the discovery and dream stages of the 4D process, after which the researchers engaged in the identification of perceived causes of success and emergent themes that led to the co-construction of a set of aspirational statements (known as provocative propositions) and an action plan for future teaching staff within the course. Engaged in the process, the students willingly wrote and spoke about their lived experiences of the course, constructing and co-constructing ideas that were professional in nature on one hand and deeply personal on the other. The process and outcomes affirmed the application and power of this strengths-based approach to uncover experiential and interpretive data pertinent to the ongoing development and sustainability of an academic course.

### Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based research approach that was developed by Cooperrider in the late 80s as an alternative approach to traditional organizational development models. As a qualitative and interpretive research approach, AI is underpinned by a social constructionist philosophy (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). This philosophy has the position that the social world is created and co-constructed in dialogue through debates and the stories we tell each other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Howe, 2001; Merriam, 1998).

The AI research approach seeks to identify positive elements of the immediate social world in terms of what is working or what appears to be causing a sense of life. From the outset, the questions asked and the subsequent inquiry brings about change. As a change strategy in organizational development, AI changes social systems by generating collective images of new and better futures by exploring the best of current practice (Bushe, 1999). In this way, AI focuses on the life or the life-centric nature of experiential accounts where individuals and organizations are seen as entities seeking solutions rather than problems to be fixed (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). In addition, this approach is designed to appreciatively inquire into the causes of life-centric moments as the basis of identifying emergent themes and aspirational statements for future practice (Hammond, 1998).

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) proposed four basic principles that underpin AI. They include the notion that the research begins with appreciation, it should be applicable, provocative (stimulating fresh thinking), and the process should be collaborative (Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne, & Wilding, 2002). The

principles of AI are incorporated in a four-step or 4D framework (Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney, & Yaegar, 2000; Giles & Kung, 2010; Hammond, 1998). Step 1 discovery, focuses on the need to describe experiences, which exemplify the best of “what has been” and “what is” in terms of students’ engagement, and their experience of the course. The second step dream, considers what the practice would look like if there were a greater alignment around the strengths discovered in the discovery step and the future aspirations. The third step, design, relates to the co-construction of provocative or possibility propositions. The final step, destiny, relates to the construction of a set of intentions for practice developed in the form of an action plan.

Since the 1980s, AI has been applied to other aspects in the business world including, for example, the nature and quality of leadership (Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, & Rader, 2010), business services (Reed et al., 2002) and much more. The AI (AI) approach has also been used in disciplines beyond business. In education for instance, Giles and Alderson (2008) utilized an AI process as the basis for an “appreciative appraisal” of an individual’s professional performance (Chapman & Giles, 2009; Giles & Kung, 2010). In addition, AI has been applied to organizational improvements in student affairs (Elleven, 2007), appreciative pedagogy (Yballe & O’Connor, 2000), professional development systems (Goldberg, 2001), and it has been the basis of explorations into the nature of organizational cultures of educational institutions (Giles & Yates, 2011a, 2011b).

### Traditional Approaches to Course Evaluations in Higher Education

Most often, the feedback that is received on a course in higher education involves quantitative satisfaction surveys provided by the institution which

seek to measure generic pedagogical, curriculum, and assessment aspects of a course (Zander & Zander, 2000). The intention is that these instruments measure the effectiveness and efficiencies within a course of study (Boud, 1992; Hattie, 2003). Managed by a central body within an institution, these measures are said to be high in terms of their validity and reliability. Most often, a lecturer's course rating from the students' satisfaction survey are then factored into the lecturer's performance review.

Alternative measures for student feedback that are qualitative in nature are less prolific. Seen as time consuming, less reliable and lacking validity, these qualitative approaches are viewed as unmanageable and cumbersome in practice. The generalizability and usefulness of the data for the purpose of performance review compounds concern over the use of such approaches. There appears to be greater interest in satisfaction surveys that capture the experiential nature of students' learning experiences. Guthrie and McCracken (2010) used a combination of survey research and individual interviews to examine student perceptions of their meaningful learning. In this way, they drew links between student satisfaction and pedagogical practice. Similarly, and in the context of nursing education, DeBrough (2003) found that student satisfaction surveys can show qualitative relationships between good pedagogy and students' perceived satisfaction.

Regardless of the quantitative or qualitative priority, what appears to be missing are instruments and measures that seek students' feedback on their "lived experiences" of a course of study (van Manen, 1990; Giles, 2008; e.g., "What aspects of the course engendered a sense of life for you?"). A sense of life refers to a peak performance moment when the experience invigorates the student. These moments are also referred to as life-centric moments (e.g., "In terms of the learning experiences, what's working?"). These questions are highly subjective in nature and yet provide experiential evidence for analysis that touches more of the holistic nature of how students have been "in" their learning experiences.

### **Applying Appreciative Inquiry to a Course Evaluation**

A research team made up of a course lecturer, a senior colleague, and an experienced AI researcher from a different organization constructed a research project that sought to gather and analyze student feedback on a course using an AI process. The research received a financial grant from the Manakau Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.

### **Methodology**

This research project was framed as an AI. Similarly, the participants were involved in an AI process: a doubly appreciative and nested inquiry. The AI process has been outlined in a generic sense earlier in this paper.

### **Context and Participants**

The context for this research inquiry is a second year teacher education course within an undergraduate Early Childhood Education program. Students who had completed the course were invited to participate in the research. The research proposal sought seven students from three different cohorts. Student interest in the research was such that 25 students participated in the research. Ethical approval was obtained for this research inquiry.

### **Research Questions**

As a qualitative inquiry, this research explored three overarching research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of student's life-centric experiences within an early childhood teacher education course?
2. How might these experiences be co-constructed as provocative possibilities that might create the possibility that students in the future might experience this course in a deep and meaningful way?
3. What specific teaching strategies and learning experiences engendered a greater sense of "life" within the course?

### **Gathering the Data**

**Experiential writing.** After an initial briefing about the research and a discussion about life-centric experiences, this inquiry began with an independent writing activity in which participants were asked to write about particular experiences within an early childhood teacher education course that they would describe as being life-centric in nature. The researchers asked the students to share the essence of their stories as a means of remembering specific events from the course. During the sharing, the researchers noted causes of success from the stories as they were shared. The researchers then asked the students to contribute other causes of success that might relate to the stories they had shared.

**Focus groups.** The researchers collected the second approach to gathering data in focus groups. In focus groups participants worked through a common

set of questions. The focus groups took 90 minutes to complete the work, which was broken with refreshments. Apart from the initial experiential writing, the remaining responses were given by participants in groups of three. The group responses included the construction of mind maps of critical words overlaid with written statements. Any sharing of information was audiotaped and transcribed.

We drew the specific questions that scaffolded the AI process for the participants from Hammond (1998) and Whitney et al. (2010). The researchers employed two types of questions: “when” and “what.” “When questions . . . are great sources of stories about strengths. If you want to learn about a person’s high-performance patterns, ask a when question” (Whitney et al., 2010, p. 46). The only “when” question was the opening question. We deliberately framed the remaining questions as “what” questions in keeping with an AI approach. For Whitney et al. (2010), “what questions are windows to the future They are an effective way to generate possibilities, explore options, and unlock potential” (p. 48).

The specific questions the researchers asked are as follows:

- Tell me about a time *when* you were most engaged, alive, and energized in this course.
- *What* was the high point of the course for you as a group?
- Who or *what* made this a successful endeavor for you? How?
- With reference to (choose 1) dialogue, engagement, teaching and learning, or assessments, *what* did you most value about the course?
- With reference to (choose 1) relationships, positive environment, or collaboration, *what* did you most value about the course?
- With reference to (choose 1) personal growth, reflection, or deeper learning, *what* did you most value about the course?
- If you had three wishes to improve the health and vitality of this course, *what* would they be?
- *What* have you learned from this course to insure your ongoing success?
- If you were to give this course an award, *what* would it be for?

### Collating the Data

A research assistant collated participants’ individual and group responses into a Word document.

Participants’ verbal responses and elaborations were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

### Analyzing the Data

We used the analytical approach AI 4D in this research inquiry. Within this analytical approach (a) thematic analyses identified patterns across the text, while (b) hermeneutic analyses identified recurring understandings. Identifying themes across the text was a process of constant comparison and involved the use of NVivo and Wordle software. These processes followed the processes described in Giles and Yates (2011b).

The task of thematic analysis was to identify “powerful” themes (van Manen, 1990) in relation to the participants’ life-centric experiences. While thematic analyses can focus on the words that were written, the benefit of coupling such an analysis to a hermeneutic consideration is the opportunity of considering the data in terms of the essential meanings and understandings that ontologically reside between the lines.

The second approach to analyzing the data was a hermeneutic analysis which followed a process articulated in Giles (2008). Such analyses seek ontological understandings that are essential to the experience. These analytical approaches were applied to the data from each cohort and then applied to the data set as a whole.

The experiential stories were the “discovery” step in an AI process. The students written causes of success and the possibilities that arose from these constituted the second step, “dream.” The third step in the process involved the identification of emergent themes and the construction of provocative propositions; the “design” step. During this phase, we reconstructed the emergent themes as affirmative statements that evoked generative and imaginative possibilities that were grounded in the original stories. The student’s data represent the first two steps in the AI process after which the analysis by the researchers completed the third and fourth steps of the process. The final step, “destiny,” involved the co-construction of an action plan where specific actions that might embed the propositions in the course in the future were identified.

### Findings

The findings from our AI process are described in the following sections.

#### Discovery

Researchers asked participants to independently identify life-centric moments within an early childhood teacher education course they completed in the past. The participants made the following statements:

- “Discussions felt like they lasted for ages as I asked myself, why I believed what I believed. . . . I found this so energizing.”
- “I realized that I couldn’t separate the rest of my life from my early childhood . . . and my experiences with people in the past influenced the decisions I was making. . . . [I]t’s all connected.”
- “I realized my philosophy didn’t just come from what I had learned . . . but through all my life experiences.”
- “A time when I felt most engaged and alive in this paper was when we were beginning to form our personal beliefs statements for our presentation. . . . I remember the lecturer asking a million probing questions . . . which I had to justify and defend my beliefs, mainly to myself.”

The recurring causes of success here include the impact of the preparation and presentation of a teaching philosophy. This particular learning experience found the students engaged within the learning experience. Participants identified their growth and awareness of how their personal histories influence their current way of being.

### Dream

We present the participants’ responses to the “what” questions here as causes of success which are contextually critical to life-centric moments.

**In-class presentation.** The in-class presentation was consistently identified as a task that engendered a depth of thinking and renewed sense of self while also affording opportunities for deeper relationships between the students. Participants referred to the in-class presentations as follows:

- “[T]he presentation . . . gave me the opportunity and the time to reflect on who I was as a teacher.”
- “[T]he combination of putting it together and trying to make sense of who I am . . . as a teacher, . . . as a person.”
- “[During] the presentations, that’s when we had the privilege of developing a close-knit classroom.”

**Getting to know the self.** The participants described the cumulating influences of the learning experiences as follows:

- “I have learned that I am a person who is worthy of values and respect by just being me.”

- “I have learned so much about myself and have obtained knowledge of myself as my own person.”
- “I have learned that to teach . . . is to teach from who you are.”
- “The process . . . really made me think about who I am and how I teach.”
- “If I am real with others, it will help them to be real with me.”
- “Encouraging . . . [us] to look inside yourself and discover who you really are.”

**Getting to know others.** The space for, and the priority of, relationships appeared to open personal and relational possibilities:

- “[W]e learned what it feels like to experience a safe space when you really feel vulnerable in the presence of others.”
- “[T]he presentations . . . brought the whole class together and we formed fantastic relationships that have continued on.”
- “[L]earning about people’s pasts and then relating it to ourselves, making connections, coming together . . . feeling for each other.”
- “Even though we were from different ethnic groups, different walks of life, we realized at the end of the day that we had a similar philosophy . . . like a common thread.”

**The teacher’s way of being.** The teacher’s way of being was integral to the participant’s learning experiences:

- “I will try to be as passionate about my teaching and insure that my students feel loved.”
- “She teaches from the heart.”
- “I have been inspired by our teachers passion whose positivity, and love for her students.”
- “The course makes me feel like I can fly and do something different.”
- “She’s passionate, listens, cares, and wants to hear.”
- “[Y]ou know she cares.”
- “The lecturer challenged our beliefs with insights from her own background.”

**Provokes reflective thinking.** The participants experienced reflective thinking:

- “[I]t gave me the opportunity and the time to reflect on who I was as a teacher.”
- “[I]t was great to critically think back on why I teach the way I do.”

- “I reflected deeply, who I was, recalling my experiences.”
- “Writing reflections is more than just *writing* reflections.”

**Theory – practice.** Participants saw interconnectedness between theory and practice:

- “Does my philosophy reflect my practice?”
- “It made me realize how my philosophy and practice merge.”
- “I have learned the connection between theory and practice with lifelong implications for learning.”
- “When developing my philosophy I realize that it is derived from my practice and my practice influences what I believe.”

**Enduring influences.** These participants wanted the essence of the course to continue:

- “If we just had a refresher course once every few years, that would be really valuable.”
- “We have to revisit our philosophies. Got to take the time to revisit.”
- “Can we please come back and do it again?”
- “It would keep us connected to our true selves.”

## Design

We describe the emergent themes in the design phase in the following section.

**In-class presentations.** The participants’ engagement in the course provided an opportunity to share their teaching philosophy in relation to their practice. The in-class presentations provided opportunity to make connections between their past and present experiences. The presentations provided an opportunity to express beliefs and make connections between past and present experiences as a process of finding oneself as a teacher.

**Getting to know self.** The learning experiences enabled students to “get to know themselves” in a deeper way. The act of asking oneself questions appears to have clarified beliefs associated with practice. This awareness encouraged a greater authenticity on the part of the participants. The priority for relationships emerged as others were listened to and known in dialogue. Conversations involved the sharing of ideas and learning about one another.

**The teacher’s way of being.** The participants readily acknowledged the teacher’s way of being as a major influence on the participants’ learning. The teacher honored and empowered the students’ meaning

making. Alongside the “why” questions, safe spaces were created that were supported and encouraged by the teacher.

**Provokes reflective thinking.** Learning experiences within and beyond this course promote deep thinking of a reflective and contemplative nature. Within the process, timely and well-structured questions can be a vehicle for such thinking.

**Theory – practice.** The participants identified an increasing understanding of the relationship between their philosophy and practice.

**Enduring influences.** The enduring influence of the participants’ experiences and reflections can be seen in the recounted stories and the ideas they shared. It should be noted that these students were not current students, having completed the paper in a previous semester.

**Propositions.** The working themes described above were shaped into an initial set of provocative propositions, which were then edited to a tighter and more provocative set of statements. The initial propositions are as follows:

- Teachers’ ways of being can help sustain safe spaces for dialogue.
- Teacher’s personal way of being empowers students to examine their beliefs.
- Deep learning occurs when students can form the link between theory, practice, and self.
- Opportunities to share beliefs with others can validate one’s own beliefs.
- In-class presentations can provide opportunity for students to co-construct meanings and develop shared understandings.
- In-class presentations can provide opportunities for students to form connections between their philosophy and practice.
- A journey towards understanding brings greater awareness and clarification of beliefs.
- Learning involves listening, sharing ideas and a willingness to want to understand others in a deeper manner.

These draft themes were re-constructed into five aspirational statements that are generative and provocative. The statements have a metaphorical flavor that calls for thinking. The six propositions we framed are as follows:

- In-class learning experiences, where students fulfill a teaching role, are a catalyst for personal and public thinking.
- Evocative teaching deepens consideration and reflection on practice from “what” and “how” to the “why.”

- Life-changing experiences occur when taken-for-granted assumptions and tacit knowing are questioned.
- A teacher's way of being enables personal and collaborative student inquiries that show student engagement as mattering.
- Communities of learners in higher education affirm the holistic nature of educational experiences such that an exploration of personal beliefs, and the affective nature of learning are integral to students' life-long learning.

### **Destiny**

The final stage of the AI process is described as destiny in which the researchers co-constructed a plan of action that engenders life-centric moments for the students. The action plan describes strategies that embed the provocative propositions in the teaching practice associated with the course. The discussion that follows considers the research findings and the usefulness and value of an AI process for course evaluations in higher education.

### **Discussion**

Within this discussion we reconsider the emergent themes and the significance of these themes in understanding the life-centric nature of a particular course in higher education. Secondly, we describe an action plan which represents the final step in the AI process. Finally, we consider the usefulness of applying the AI process in the context of a post-course evaluation.

Embarking on a qualitative inquiry that required interpretive and hermeneutic processes opened essential understandings that act as a lens into students' lived experiences of an early childhood teacher education course in higher education. The participants' responses form an appreciative framework which provides teaching staff and researchers an opportunity to learn how the course is being experienced. The emerging themes illustrate these points.

### **Emergent Themes**

Working from experiential recounts and appreciative questions, an AI process has enabled us to identify a holistic set of themes. Themes relate to a particular in-class activity and the learning that surrounded this activity. The data note the extent to which students have independently and collaboratively deepened a process of their intended learning. The in-class presentation might be described as a catalyst for provoking and fostering contemplative thinking. Such thinking ranges from

participants self-talk to group and class dialogue. The participants spoke of an enduring change: a "getting to know themselves." Such experiences involve reflection and contemplation. Knowing oneself has reciprocity of knowing others. In socially constructed spaces, ideas are formed and are available for others in dialogue (Gergen, 2009a, 2009b). In this way, the dialogue continues beyond the space as the essence of further learning.

Teacher educators in higher education have traditionally advocated for learning approaches that engender deep learning. This particular course appears to have been a vehicle for such thinking. Moreover, the nature of the thinking has a distinctly qualitative feel. Heidegger (1968, 1992) distinguishes between calculative thinking and contemplative thinking. For Heidegger, calculative thinking is the type of thinking that is task-oriented, whereas contemplative thinking occurs when individuals are available for thoughts to find them. There are many experiences that the participants shared where they became aware of a renewed depth in their thinking. At times, students were surprised by the thinking process and the personal learning that resulted (Heidegger, 1992).

The participants' life-centric experiences show a holistic consideration. Theory and practice came together as a concern for thinking, valuing, believing, and authentic ways of being. Participants found the teaching staff entering experiences in a similar manner. Generative thinking, of central importance to an AI, was further supported by the use of metaphors and analogies as ways of appreciatively considering the essence of one's experience.

### **Provocative Propositions**

The purpose of the propositions is to frame ideals for the future in a generative language. While future focused, the propositions are critically grounded in the participant's initial experiences and stories and, as such, contain a relational connection between one's past and one's future becoming (Giles, 2010a, 2011a, 2011b).

The construction of provocative propositions was not a reductionist activity but rather a generative task. Capturing essential and hermeneutic understandings from earlier analytical steps, the propositions were co-constructed to focus the lecturer's purpose and way of being with future students. The propositions, while emerging from past experiences, became vision statements for future life-centric teaching practice. While limited in quantity, the propositions present a challenge for teaching staff within the context of higher education.

### **Action Plan**

The purpose of our action plan is to identify specific actions that teaching staff can do to amplify the

presence of life-centric characteristics in their teaching in the next presentation of the course. Each proposition is considered on its own. Strategies that might facilitate and embed the proposition we constructed in the form of an action plan and critically considered within the current context of the program and the department. The actions are strategies that teaching staff intend to practice along with an associated timeframe. For these participants, we constructed the action plan displayed in Table 1 from the propositions. Our experience working with an AI process suggests that action plans and strategies need to be reviewed regularly within the first twelve months and thereafter on an annual basis.

### The Application of AI as a Tool for Course Evaluations

The AI process uncovered essential and taken for granted characteristics, essence, and understandings that are not typically accounted for in course evaluations. The participants' enthusiasm and genuine interest in the process suggests that generative dialogue is indeed necessary in any review of a teaching program and that such a review, using an

appreciative lens, can be full of life. The participants' readiness to recount their life-centric experiences and the clarity with which they completed this opened the dialogue to the relational and human aspects of teaching and learning. This was evident across the different cohorts.

The AI process is very relevant and user-friendly for teachers and educators wanting a holistic consideration of their teaching programs from their students' points of view. The AI process appears to frame and enable an energizing post-course review that identifies and describes enduring and essential characteristics with the inter-relational nature of a learning context. The process is not simply the recall of nice ideas, but rather an inquiry into life-centric experiences in which students were lost in thoughts, deeply engaged, and reaching for meaning. We suggest that this is not the usual experience for students completing a course evaluation. We wonder too whether the AI process is also a reminder that the educative influence of our teaching and learning in higher education is always enduring and always essential; the critical issue here is whether the influence is a positive one for the students.

Table 1  
*Action Plan Constructed from the Propositions*

	Proposition	Action	When
1	The learning experience known as the presentation is a catalyst for personal thinking and public sharing.	Continue to prioritize the presentation as a catalyst for thinking. Introduce the presentation at the outset of the course	Prior to the semester Week 1
2	Evocative teaching deepens the consideration and reflection on practice from the 'what' and 'how' to include the why.	Sustain a proactive questioning disposition as a teacher Up-skill student's personal reflection such that they ask themselves and others, the why questions	Ongoing Up-skill early in the course
3	Life-changing experiences arrive when obvious and taken-for-granted assumptions and tacit knowing are questioned.	Sustain an <i>a-tune</i> -ment to students assumptions within the ebb and flow of learning experiences Student's thinking is supported by diary entries on a regular basis and submitted for assessment	Ongoing Student entry from week 1
4	Enabling deep, personal and collaborative student enquiries requires a teacher's way of being to care, and show that student engagement matters.	Teachers need to sustain their sense of life as an educators	Prioritize reading, writing and reflective personal space
5	Communities of inquiry in tertiary contexts need to affirm the holistic nature of educational experiences such that an exploration of values and beliefs, and the affective nature of learning are integral to students' life-long learning.	Create an ongoing dialogue among teaching staff that adult education is not only an academic task, rather an holistic	Staff meeting topic each semester

A critical factor in the success of applying an AI process in the context of higher education was the role of a co-researcher who was also a critical friend to the researchers and who brought to the research team doctoral experiences in the use of hermeneutic and phenomenological analysis. The team was then provoked to reach for ontological meanings and expressions that captured the participants' experiences, as was articulated in our provocative propositions. The necessity of moving the analysis within an AI from a coding activity to an interpretive and hermeneutic act was fundamental to the success of this research. This changed priority and emphasis within the analysis, we would argue, and opens appreciative evidence to the cause of transforming teaching approaches in higher education.

### Conclusion

This research is built upon previous research which adapted the AI process into the form of what Giles (2010a, 2010b) coins as an *appreciative appraisal* (e.g., see Giles & Kung, 2010). From the success of these former experiences, we wanted to apply the AI process to a different aspect of our educational practice: course evaluations. Observations of students' excitement and engagement within a teaching course became the focus of our research inquiry. The careful construction of appreciative questions and data collection across several cohorts confirmed an energy and engagement within participants' course-related experiences. Deeply engaging and genuinely authentic, the AI process involves a wondering that can touch the soul. The appreciative questions elicit recounts of life-centric experiences that act as catalysts for interpretive analysis that open the meaning making process embedded in the experiences themselves. The generative power of AI appears to be a key agent in this process as the teacher-student dialogue re-lives former experiences, and in so doing creates further meanings and understandings post-course.

The generative and creative process, known as AI, has the ability to move deficit discourse towards deep engagement and contemplative insight within oneself and with others. The process, and the approach more generally, frame a discourse, which open participants' experiences in a generative manner towards ongoing and deepening reflections. We suggest that an AI affords educators an appreciative lens as a means of understanding the enduring power of educational experiences.

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