i.e.: inquiry in education

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 4

2015

Initial Efforts to Coordinate Appreciative Inquiry: Facilitators' Experiences and Perceptions

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Facilitators' Experiences and Perceptions

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Introduction

It is important for early-stage doctoral students to become engaged in research as soon as possible (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Piert, 2013; Solomon, 2009). According to Solomon (2009), "Entering doctoral candidates should begin by being members of a research team where they collect and manage data and gain an appreciation for the research process" (p. 80). Muakami-Ramalho et al. (2013) argue that research knowledge and identity should be developed through contextualized research in one's own work setting, and supported by formal (cohorts and seminars) and informal (collegial support and writing groups) communities. To develop research skills, faculty can assign field activities to the early-stage doctoral student, such as observations and interviews, coding data, developing themes, and writing research memos (Buchanan, 2012).

Coryell and associates maintain that doctoral students' emotions play a critical role in their development as researchers, and that doctoral programs should foster students' self-determination through collegial support groups and mentoring by faculty (Coryell, Wagner, Clark, & Stuessy, 2013). Dinkelman et al. (2012) describe a doctoral seminar in which early stage doctoral students discussed problems and issues in research. The seminar served as a catalyst for student research, often collaborative, that led to presentations and publications. Students who completed the seminar developed an appreciation for collaborative inquiry.

Education doctoral programs that culminate in action research dissertations often involve students in action research early in their program of study, with students who are employed as educators using their work setting as their research site (Zambo & Isa, 2012). In a doctoral program described by Wetzel and Ewbank (2013), for example, students engage in two cycles of action research prior to their dissertation, and base their dissertation on a third cycle. Zambo and Isa (2012) describe a doctoral program in which students conduct an action research cycle each semester, and culminate their research with an action research dissertation. Influences on the student's action research focus identified by Wetzel and Ewbank (2013) include members of the students' research community, earlier action research, stakeholders in the doctoral students' work setting, and the work context. Wetzel and Ewbank also found that a fellow student or university supervisor serving as a critical friend was an important source of support for the doctoral student engaged in action research.

One action research approach described by Arhar et al. (2013) involves doctoral students facilitating teams of teachers in school-based action research. This approach has two purposes: (a) to improve learning in school classrooms and (b) to involve doctoral students in collaborative action research with schools and teachers. A university faculty member mentors the doctoral student throughout the project, which serves as a research apprenticeship. This process allows the doctoral student to experience "an emergent, developing relationship with the research process itself" (p. 228).

Although [appreciative inquiry] "springs from the tradition of action research," it also "criticizes that tradition as being too focused on remediation and problem solving" (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011, p. 423)

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a version of action research that "reinforces, expands and continues the action research tradition of the field first set forth with the work of Kurt Lewin" (Yaeger, Soresen, & Bengtsson, 2005, p. 302). Although AI "springs from the tradition of action research," it also "criticizes that tradition as being too focused on remediation and problem solving" (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011, p. 423). AI has been "broadly described as a positive mode of action research" (Mcintosh, Freeth, & Berridge, 2013, p. 376). More specifically, Giles and Alderson (2008) define AI as "a research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on the participants' actual experiences of best practice" (p. 465).

According to Ludema, Cooperrider, and Barrett (2001), AI is focused "on asking the unconditional positive question to ignite positive dialogue and action within human systems" (p. 191). Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), who developed the AI model, based it on three propositions: (a) the need to move beyond the problem-solving approach, (b) the notion that organizations are socially constructed realities, and (c) the power of new ideas as a force for change. Some key concepts underlying AI are stakeholder participation, narrative, discourse, and building on existing strengths (Bushe, 2011).

AI is focused on "how people think rather than what people do" and a commitment "to let go of control in planned change efforts and nurture a more improvisational approach to the action phase" (Bushe & Kassam, 2005, p. 176). The original five principles of AI follow:

1. *The constructionist principle:* reality is socially constructed, and a team or organization can co-construct a better reality through collaborative inquiry and collective articulation of a better future.

2. *The principle of simultaneity:* inquiry and change cannot be separated. Inquiry *is* intervention.

3. *The poetic principle:* the team or organization is like a book with many stories. What stories to focus on is up to the team or organization. It is best to focus inquiry on positive rather than negative stories.

4. *The anticipatory principle:* If the team or organization creates a positive vision of the future, it will tend to move toward that vision.

5. *The positive principle:* the organization or team and the inquiry process should promote positive images and experiences, social bonding, joy, and celebration (Bushe & Kassam, 2005; Evans, Thornton, & Usinger, 2012).

Originally, there were four phases of AI: discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The *discovery phase* involves participants discussing what they value most about their team or organization, their work, and their colleagues. The *dream phase* consists of participants envisioning a better future by co-creating a vision of the ideal organization or team. In the *design phase*, the group plans for a better future by brainstorming proposals, creating a flexible plan, mobilizing resources, and committing to action. The *destiny phase* calls for participants to construct the better future through ongoing inquiry and capacity building (Ludema et al., 2001; Priest, Kaufman, Brunton, & Seibel, 2013; Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2011). Eventually, a new component, *topic choice*, was added to the AI process. Topic choice, considered a separate phase in some models of AI, and integrated with the dream phase in other models, consists of the selection of a positive focus of inquiry.

Purpose of the Study and Guiding Questions

The purpose of the study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of three early-stage doctoral students who facilitated separate AI projects in different educational settings as part of a yearlong doctoral seminar, and to understand the implications for the doctoral students' learning within the diverse contexts in which they facilitated AI. For clarity's sake, in the remainder of this article we will refer to the doctoral students as "AI facilitators" and the other participants in the AI projects as "AI participants." The guiding questions for the study follow:

1. What were the AI facilitators' initial perceptions of AI?

2. How did the AI facilitators describe efforts to implement the four phases of AI?

3. What were the AI facilitators' perceptions of whether the five principles of AI were adhered to during the project?

4. What were the AI facilitators' perceptions of the AI outcomes?

5. What, if any, types of personal learning resulting from facilitating AI were reported by the AI facilitators?

Participants

The three primary participants were enrolled in the seminar on appreciative inquiry as one of their electives in a doctoral program in educational leadership at a university in the southwestern United States. All three students were in their first year of doctoral study. None of the three had

completed any of the series of qualitative and quantitative research courses required by the doctoral program and offered later in their program of study. Breslow was an educational diagnostician who worked at a middle school and served on a Tier III Response to Intervention (RTI) team. He had previously participated in an informal action research study on youth–adult partnership for the Community Learning Exchange. Breslow wished to use AI to improve his school's RTI process. Crowell was a member of a team of instructional coaches in a large urban school district. She had carried out an action research project as a master's student and assisted a professor with two research projects on teacher leaders. Crowell and her colleagues wished to provide new coaches the necessary support to become successful. Francis was a full-time doctoral student with a background in youth development. He had completed a master's thesis based on a small number of community interviews and conducted small-scale survey research. He wished to stay grounded in his field while working on his doctorate by providing service to undergraduate students. None of the three early-stage doctoral students had ever led or participated in appreciative inquiry.

The AI seminar was led by a faculty member in a doctoral program in school improvement, and met regularly over three terms. In the fall semester, the AI facilitators learned about appreciative inquiry through readings and discussions, created preliminary plans for introducing AI to a group of volunteer participants, and recruited groups in their school, district, or university setting to engage with them in AI. All three AI facilitators initiated the AI in the spring semester.

Research Methods

There were two levels of data gathering and analysis in the overall research. The first level consisted of data gathered and analyzed within the AI itself. The second level included data gathered and analyzed for the corresponding case studies that examined the AI projects. At the first of the two levels, the AI facilitators and participants gathered data from the start of the AI at the beginning of the spring semester until the AI was discontinued. Data collection was ongoing throughout the AI. Each meeting of the group included some type of data gathering and analysis as the group worked its way through the phases of AI. Data gathered at this first level were fairly consistent across all three projects, and included the following:

- Notes on AI participants' sharing of interview results that pairs of participants conducted with each other (peer interviews are a typical AI technique for reflection and early-stage planning)
- Notes from whole-group meetings
- Ongoing written reflections by individual AI participants
- Various documents and artifacts of AI activities, such as announcements, agendas, photographs, charts, planning documents, and so forth
- Individual interviews with AI participants on their perceptions of the direction and value of the AI

Analysis of first-level data was sometimes carried out by the AI group as a whole, and sometimes by the AI facilitator, who then shared the analysis with the group. The analysis tended to be informal, and usually consisted of reviewing documents and artifacts, deriving themes or "big ideas" from the documents, and then summarizing the data on charts or in diagrams so that they could be easily reviewed by the group. Data gathering and analysis were used continuously to plan actions and assess effects.

The second level of data gathering and analysis was more formal and consisted of a case study of each AI project. Data for each case study included the following:

- The various data from the AI project as described above
- A reflective journal kept by the AI facilitator throughout the project
- Notes from a monthly seminar conducted by the professor who coordinated the overall project
- A report on the AI that the AI facilitator wrote at the end of her or his participation in the project. The report described the AI facilitator and participants' journey through each phase of the AI.

We began our analysis for each case study by creating an inventory of the case set. We divided the data into primary and supplementary data. Primary data included written reflections of AI participants, the AI facilitator's reflective journal, notes on the particular AI taken by the faculty member during seminar meetings, and the written report by the AI facilitator. Supplemental data included other documents and artifacts from meetings and activities held during the AI. We reviewed the data several times in order to become intimate with the texts and artifacts we had gathered.

Coding of each text within the primary data began with open coding, followed by axial coding to develop categories. We constructed a matrix for each of the five research questions that allowed us to display and compare relevant categories derived from the four types of primary data. For each research question, we triangulated data from the four primary data sources with each other and with relevant supplemental data. Although we were primarily concerned with in-case analysis in order to develop separate case reports on each of the AI projects, we also engaged in cross-case analysis in order to identify and discuss similarities and differences across the three cases. Analytic memos made throughout data analysis assisted us in clarifying questions about the data, developing categories, interpreting results, and drawing conclusions.

Findings

The findings are presented as separate cases of AI facilitated by Breslow, Crowell, and Francis. Each case will present findings relative to the five guiding questions listed above.

Breslow's RTI Tier III Committee: AI Interrupted

[Breslow's] chief…concern was his observation that educators tended to view the world through a problem-solving

RTI is a three-tiered model for providing assistance to struggling learners. Tier III, the most intensive level of assistance, combines classroom and pullout support coordinated by a committee of general education teachers, special education evaluation staff, grade-level counselors, and grade-level coordinators. Breslow facilitated his school's Tier III committee in AI. All 13 members of the group agreed to participate in the AI and continued in the project until the end of the school year.

Breslow's initial perceptions of AI. Breslow had experienced personal growth as a result of his appreciative disposition, and thus had a positive perception of AI:

> The idea of doing an appreciative inquiry project was appealing to me, as I had been immersed on my own self-improvement journey centered on the idea of being grateful and showing appreciation for what one has and for the people with whom one interacts, and embracing future possibilities.

At the same time, Breslow was not sure if the other members of the Tier III committee would embrace an appreciative approach. His chief reason for this concern was his observation that educators tended to view the world through a problem-solving paradigm.

Breslow's description of efforts to implement the four phases of AI. Breslow began the discovery phase with group members interviewing each other on life-giving qualities of the group as well as what they hoped to get out of the AI process. A number of the AI participants spoke about the collaborative nature of the committee. Others said that the different types of expertise provided by group members were beneficial to the process.

Another life-giving quality perceived by the AI participants was the positive feelings they got when the team helped a teacher to understand and address a student's learning problem. One group member expressed this feeling as follows:

> I find it rewarding to take a kid who is struggling, and you're trying to pinpoint the area, and the teacher's working with the kid, and there's this a-ha moment of, "Oh, my gosh, this is where we're having the issue, and we figured that out!"

Responses to interview questions on what AI participants hoped to get out of the AI process included more training and support for the teachers who the AI participants worked with, making RTI user-friendly, and a more efficient RTI process.

Although most AI participants responded positively to the discovery phase, Breslow was concerned that some group members were still attached to the problem-solving approach. To address this concern, he decided to conduct individual follow-up discussions with some of the AI participants for the purpose of drawing out life-giving experiences derived from being members of the group. Breslow found that the AI participants he met with responded positively and that

his individual discussions with those participants help them to embrace the appreciative approach.

During the dream phase, Breslow asked the group to "imagine the perfect RTI," and to consider the question, "What are your deepest desires for RTI?" These questions generated a range of dreams from individual group members. The AI participants integrated their individual dreams into a holistic vision of a redesigned RTI process.

In the design phase, the group developed a plan that included ideas for professional development and mentoring for teachers, new ways of monitoring student progress, and new ways of providing interventions in the classroom. Breslow described the design process in his written reflections:

> Without a doubt, the dialogue was constructive. Changes were happening at the same time that dialogue was taking place. The group was generating ideas for a new and improved RTI process, while recognizing the contributions that people have made to the success of some students.

By the end of the design phase, the group had reached a consensus on several aspects of the RTI process that they wished to change and appeared to be committed to those changes. The design phase concluded at the end of the school year. The following year, Breslow took a position at a different school, and the AI project did not resume. Summer vacation, Breslow's absence, new district and school initiatives, and the tradition of short-lived PK-12 school innovations had taken their toll.

Breslow's perceptions of adherence to the five principles of AI. Breslow believed that all five of the AI principles were operating during the AI. He concluded that the constructivist principle was reflected in the collaborative work of the group, the group's consensus building on what aspects of the RTI process needed to change, and the integrated dream they developed. An example of simultaneity cited by Breslow was the fact that the group's dialogue about an ideal future became integrated with discussions about how to provide immediate, concrete assistance to students.

The poetic principle, according to Breslow, was present in the group's discussions of its commitment to students, and also in its use of collaboration, expertise, and recognition of individual contributions. He perceived the anticipatory principle to be present because the group began to improve its services to students after the dream phase. Finally, he believed that he had fostered the positive principle by continuously asking positive questions in group sessions and individual conferences, and facilitating team activities intended to promote social bonding and celebration of the group's accomplishments.

Breslow's perceptions of the AI outcomes. Although there was no formal destiny phase, several aspects of the plan were incorporated into the RTI process on a piecemeal basis, and the group began to function with increased dialogue and collaboration, which Breslow attributed to the three phases of AI that had been completed. He reported that the positive feedback he

received from school personnel and his observations indicated that the AI participants had improved the assistance they were providing teachers and students with special needs.

Breslow's personal learning resulting from the AI. Breslow reported learning several things about AI from his experience facilitating the RTI committee. One learning he reported was "small is good"; he concluded that a group engaging in AI should focus on a single, well-defined goal. If a group's long-term dream is a complex one, he believes the group should start off with a more limited design focused on the first steps in turning that dream into destiny. The power of one-to-one discussions outside of the group sessions was another learning that he discussed in his reflections on AI. He shared,

> Individuals seem to thrive on one-to-one encounters outside of the group to facilitate connections and to augment group discussions. I found that when I was able to sit down with individuals, the level of insight and appreciation increased.

Breslow reported learning that the principles of AI are more important than its structure:

> I plan to attend to the principles that undergird AI, as these underscore the holistic beauty of AI. The principles provide a guide for individuals to understand that AI is more than simply going through the four "D" phases—it is a process and celebration. Appreciating people and organizations and the stories that live within each provides the direction for AI.

Finally, Breslow believed that he had learned a great deal about how to facilitate AI and that his facilitation of future AI would be more successful because of the experience he had gained.

Crowell's Work with Colleagues to Support New Instructional Coaches: AI Completed
Crowell was a member of a team of instructional coaches within the secondary education department of a large urban school district. She asked for volunteers from the coaching group to join her in AI, and seven coaches accepted her invitation. The AI participants worked in different content areas: coaching teachers of math, English language arts, social studies, special education, and ELL. All seven of the initial participants completed the AI.

Crowell's initial perceptions of AI. Crowell described her feelings going into the AI:

> When I started the AI journey, I was unsure how the process would work. I had completed action research before, from a problem-solving perspective. Now I was going to try this process from the positive position. I was wondering if this process would work for instructional coaches in a public school district, as we often view the organization from a deficit position. It would be a process of "unlearning" (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). I was uncertain what this process would look like.

Crowell also was concerned because a few of the AI participants historically had been skeptical about new initiatives. She decided to be open to these colleagues, and let them express themselves openly in the team meetings.

Crowell's description of efforts to implement the four phases of AI. Throughout the AI process, Crowell facilitated reflective activities to help the AI participants understand the principles and phases of AI, but she allowed the group members to choose their own research question and make their own decisions during each phase of the project.

In the first meeting of the discovery phase, Crowell introduced AI and then split the group into pairs and asked the AI participants to talk to their partners about a time they were excited about their work as coaches. This activity led the AI participants to begin thinking about a common dream they might wish to articulate in the dream phase. After the meeting, she reflected in her journal, "They were all so willing to try to learn something new and felt good about what we did in the meeting." She also wrote, "There was energy in the room during that meeting which gave me hope that the process would work and we could create something new."

Early in the dream phase, problems arose because of the wording Crowell used in a series of questions on developing a dream that she had asked the group to reflect on. In the questions, she asked the AI participants about what type of "program" they wanted to create. Even as the group engaged in written reflection on her questions prior to a group discussion, she realized she had made a poor word choice. She wrote in her journal, "What was I thinking? I did not want to create a program. I have never seen programs as a way to change. What was I really asking from them?" When the group shared their reflections, the other coaches made it clear they did not like the word "program" either. One representative comment was, "I would like to create a space of openness and honesty—to create an environment, not a program."

Once everyone agreed that their dream would not be a traditional program, the group was able to collaboratively move toward a common dream. New coaches were joining the group the following year, and the AI participants wanted to do something that would support the novice coaches in their new roles. The group eventually agreed on an AI question: "How do veteran instructional coaches create a space for new coaches to enter the team and receive the necessary support to become successful?"

As the group approached the design phase, Crowell was concerned that some members were still taking a problem-solving, rather than an appreciative approach, so she decided on a preliminary activity before moving into the design phase. She asked the AI participants to discuss what they did best as a group. Her purpose in doing this was to help make the AI participants aware of their positive attributes and how they could use those attributes in the design process.

The group's design for supporting new colleagues had three components, including using Moodle as an information source for the new coaches, designing professional development opportunities for the novice coaches, and creating a team mission statement to be shared with the new colleagues as part of their induction. The AI participants also agreed to hold a summer retreat for the purpose of writing the mission statement.

The destiny phase began with the aforementioned retreat. All of the AI participants assumed different leadership responsibilities to make the retreat a success. The group developed the following mission statement to guide the coaching of teachers and to share with the new coaches when they came on board the following year: "Our mission is to facilitate change by building

capacity through collaboration, so that all students have access to quality instruction and curriculum."

In her journal, Crowell wrote, "There was true synergy during the retreat as we created our mission statement. All of the coaches were engaged in the day, learning from each other. There was only positivity in the room." The other AI participants agreed that the retreat was a success. One coach wrote, "Great day! We don't get enough of these. I love learning from my peers." Another AI participant stated, "I think it was a wonderful opportunity for all to come together in an organized way to recalibrate ourselves."

The remainder of the destiny phase was carried out the following school year, after the completion of the university seminar. In addition to sharing the mission statement with the new coaches in the fall, the group members reviewed the mission statement periodically throughout the school year to remind themselves of their purpose. Moodle also was made available to the new coaches, who were able to access it for technical forms and professional articles as well as a blog on which they posted questions and wrote reflections on their daily work. Two professional development opportunities were offered to the new coaches, one on coaching for addressing diversity and the other on cognitive coaching. The group members also supported each other throughout the school year through such activities as sharing and discussing books and articles on coaching.

Crowell's perceptions of adherence to the five principles of AI. Crowell shared that both she and the AI participants believed that the reflective conversations the group engaged in throughout the AI embraced the constructivist principle. One of the coach's comments reflected this belief: "When presented with a chance to reflect, positive ideas for improvement can be created, and hashing them out allowed for good ideas to become better." During the design phase of the AI, Crowell began to note the presence of simultaneity. For example, in her journal, she recalled a conversation between two of the AI participants:

> I heard Michael tell Robin the other day that if we don't want our teachers to have deficient talk about the kids, maybe we should not express so much deficient talk about our teachers. He then followed up with, "What is the teacher doing that is working?"

Crowell believed that activities like the peer interviews about an exciting time the AI participants had experienced in their work, and discussions of what they did well as a group, represented the poetic principle. She noted the AI participants themselves promoted the poetic principle when they insisted on focusing their inquiry on something more positive than another "program." Lyn considered the success of the AI as evidence of the anticipatory principle. Indeed, even those AI participants who had expressed initial skepticism about AI had embraced the anticipatory principle by the end of the project.

Crowell felt that she fostered the positive principle throughout the AI, as evidenced by the energy and excitement she observed at each session, and the written reflections of the AI participants. She considered the retreat held at the beginning of the destiny stage to be an especially vivid example of the positive principle actualized. She believed that the principles of AI were the most important aspects of the approach and shared that, while the AI participants did

not use the terms associated with the five principles on a regular basis, their behaviors and reflections indicated that they had internalized the principles.

Crowell's perceptions of the AI outcomes. Crowell reported that all three parts of the destiny phase—the creation and sharing of the mission statement, Moodle assistance, and professional development—were successfully implemented. The feedback she gathered from the AI participants indicated that they too considered the AI a success. The instructional coaches who participated in the AI were not only positive about the support they were providing to the new coaches, but also reported their own professional development as a result of the AI. A representative example of feedback from the coaches follows:

> I really felt like I grew professionally after working with the AI group. I felt like it helped us to focus our attention on something productive and helped to facilitate collaboration. My biggest takeaway from the process was to start with our strength and think big. After participating in the AI group I'm more cognizant in my work of starting with the positive.

The AI participants believed that the success of the AI was due to a combination of the AI framework and Crowell's capable facilitation of the process. One participant noted, "As a group, we have plenty of dreams/ideas. This structure and the competent leadership helped to empower me to think of those dreams as attainable, which is a powerful takeaway for sure."

Crowell's personal learning resulting from the AI. Crowell reported learning that it is important for the facilitator's actions to be consistent with the AI philosophy. The AI participants reinforced this learning when they objected to developing a traditional assistance "program" for the new instructional coaches. Facilitating the AI changed Crowell from a person with doubts about the feasibility of AI to a strong advocate:

> As I reflect on the process of leading the veteran instructional coaches though appreciative inquiry, I realize that I have been changed. I find myself looking at the positive in the situations. I am drawn to finding the strengths in people or groups, asking myself, "Where can we start with the positive to move us forward?" I have become a believer.

Crowell believed that her experience facilitating AI for the first time prepared her to be a better facilitator of AI in the future, and she soon was given the opportunity to test out her new skills. Near the end of the instructional coaches' AI, she was asked to facilitate her district's secondary mathematics leadership team as they developed a five-year professional development plan for the district's math teachers. She thought, "Why not take the leadership team through the AI process to achieve this goal?" With that question, a new AI project was born.

One participant noted, "As a group, we have plenty of dreams/ideas. This structure and the competent leadership helped to empower me to think of those

Francis's Work with Undergraduates: AI Reconfigured
Francis decided to recruit a group of undergraduates from

the university where he was enrolled as a doctoral student to participate in his AI project: "I was intrigued by the possibility of working with undergraduates, to help them develop their own collaborations, and to help them understand and situate a new process which they could hopefully use throughout their careers." Five undergraduates volunteered to work with Francis as AI participants, but only three remained at the end of the semester.

Francis's initial perceptions of AI. Francis expressed mixed initial perceptions about AI. On the one hand, as a youth development specialist he was committed to AI's affirmative approach:

> First, as a youth development practitioner, I was keenly aware of the assets-based approach in which AI is grounded…Working with marginalized youth can often yield to a deficit-based or fix-em-up strategy. Second, I was energized by the aesthetic qualities of AI that move it beyond simply another planning method to a space that is much more holistic and positive.

Despite his attraction to AI, Francis admitted misgivings. He was aware of the assertion by some critics that AI "is too positive and does not confront the issues in a serious manner." Another concern expressed by Francis was the possibility that AI participants might be too wedded to the problem-based approach to embrace AI. A final concern related to the nature of the group he would be working with: it would not be a group engaged in a common enterprise. Rather, he would be working with a group of individuals who had little in common save their enrollment at the same university and their interest in AI. Overall, he was willing to giving AI a try, and was excited about discovering how the approach would work in practice, but was not confident that the project would be successful.

Francis's description of efforts to implement the four phases of AI. Because Francis would be working with AI participants who had no common endeavor, he decided to restructure the AI process as follows:

> Rather than trying to coordinate a group of dissimilar individuals to revolve around a single issue, we would create a network of individuals who would learn about AI in order to use the process in their work with other groups in their own community and/or organizational setting. This would become an individual learning process created in a group setting to provide support for learning and success.

The project began with two informal meetings in which potential AI participants were provided information on the project and developed a general sense of an area in which they wished to focus their inquiry. Five of the undergraduates who attended the information sessions decided to participate in the AI.

At the group's first formal meeting, the AI participants began the discovery phase by interviewing each other on their personal backgrounds as well as on groups and causes that were important to them and that might benefit from AI. After sharing information from the interviews, the group went about identifying common assets that would assist both the present group and the AI groups that members of Francis's team would facilitate. The group identified common values, energy sources, and life-giving forces.

At the end of the discovery phase, the group was asked to reflect on the AI process thus far. One AI participant said, "There's change needed…and this process may help in contributing to the positive changes—only way to find out is to test it." Another said, "Keeping positive, talking about the best things in people—the community work I do is like that—we support each other; we are like a family." Francis wrote in his journal, "They seemed excited, but I have to make sure I am not teaching, and allowing them to work through the process. It's not a workshop or lecture. It's a process."

By the beginning of the dream phase, two of the AI participants had dropped out of the project and there were three remaining. For Francis, this was the low point of the process:

> I became very concerned if I would be able to complete the project. There was a brief moment when I considered contacting our project sponsor to shift my focus and start again. However, after discussing the issue with my colleagues, they convinced me that the purpose of the work was also to practice participatory research, including the problems that may arise, and the research was also about my personal reflections on what would and could make the next AI more effective.

After he decided to move forward with the project, Francis's next concern was to help the remaining AI participants develop concrete plans for making their dreams a reality. This phase started with Francis asking the AI participants to articulate a specific dream they were going to work to accomplish while facilitating a group in a community or organizational context. To assist the AI participants, he asked them a series of questions: "What does that [dream] look like in a year? Who, specifically, is involved? How will you know when you are finished?" After all of the AI participants had shared their dream, Francis asked them to write a haiku about the dream, the group the dream was for, or some other aspect of AI they had explored thus far. At the end of the dream phase, he wrote the following in his journal:

> Today was awesome! Exhilarated! The main thing was to focus on the poetry. It is a principle, but it works so well in trying to focus the energy and the thoughts and ideas during the dream process. They were so willing, too!

In the design phase, the AI participants developed and shared action plans for making their dreams reality. At the end of the design phase, Francis wrote, "Being able to clarify the process during the design phase was instrumental and helped me to continue to deepen my understanding of AI."

Francis's work with the group ceased at the end of the academic year, and although none of the three remaining AI participants had completed their own AI facilitation by that point, they had all carried out the first steps of their separate projects that, taken together, constituted the destiny phase of his work with them. The AI participants met at the end of the semester to describe their initial work as AI facilitators and discuss ways that group members could informally support each other in the future. One of the three AI participants still in the group was working with their own group to have handball recognized by the university as an official sport. A second AI participant was focused on working with a group of high school youth on community-based

improvement projects. The third member of the group was working with a community organization on hosting a gathering for undergraduate college students on issues they were facing.

Francis's perceptions of adherence to the five principles of AI. Francis believed that the constructivist principle was at play throughout the AI, as the AI participants collaboratively assisted each other to construct visions in their respective focus areas. He saw evidence of the principle of simultaneity in the connections the AI participants were making and the organizing they were doing within their local group or community to lay the groundwork for long-term change. He also perceived simultaneity in the AI participants' use of the inquiry process to discover the positive in their respective areas of interest and develop the confidence that they could bring about change in these areas.

Francis fostered the poetic principle throughout the AI by asking the AI participants to share positive stories about their focus areas and to present positive ideas for the future. Asking the AI participants to translate their dreams into haikus was another effort to promote the poetic principle. He had the anticipatory principle in mind when he asked the AI participants to create positive and specific visions of their future AI projects. He believed that the anticipatory principle was reflected in the participants' initiation of their own AI projects. Finally, Francis believed that the sharing of personal backgrounds and values as well as the emphasis on mutual support throughout the AI led to the social bonding that is characteristic of the positive principle. At their last meeting, for example, the AI participants discussed ways they could continue to support each other in their individual efforts at facilitating their own AI groups.

Francis's perceptions of the AI outcomes. The nature of the AI that Francis facilitated limited the reporting of specific outcomes, since the purpose of the AI was to assist the AI participants to facilitate their own AI projects, and those "second generation" projects were still in their early stages at the end of the academic year. In the group's last meeting, he asked the three remaining AI participants to reflect on what they had learned. One participant wrote, "I think we, as dreamers, are destined to make dreams come true and have the power to do so. A destiny can last forever, and take forever to accomplish." In commenting on this reflection, Francis wrote,

> I was particularly drawn to this statement, as this was the cyclical and sustainable process that AI tries to get at; it is not a quick-fix, deficit-based, crisis-mode model. AI is a long-term process that continues to cycle back on itself in order to create a longer and more balanced approach toward organizational design and community development.

At the end of his work with the students, Francis concluded that the participants who completed the process learned much about the change process in general and AI in particular.

Francis's personal learning resulting from the AI. Francis reported that the project was a unique learning experience for him:

> I have served as a facilitator for many years, but this was my first time as a participant–researcher, and I think I gained valuable insight into how to design a process. AI is not

> simply an organizational planning process, but a way to engage people and communities in understanding the cyclical nature of thought and positive action.

By the end of his participation in the project, the concerns Francis had expressed about AI at the beginning of the process had disappeared and he had become a strong proponent of AI:

> I must admit I was skeptical. But standing in the room, having to explain each of the phases, the importance of the concepts associated with each phase, creating an understanding of the principles and how to utilize the full range of thought and research tools at my disposal, galvanized my understanding and made me a convert, so to speak.

Discussion

The AI facilitators became involved in learning about and planning for the AI in their first semester of doctoral coursework, and initiated the research in their second semester, consistent with the recommendation by many scholars to have doctoral students involved in research as soon as possible (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013; Solomon, 2009; Zambo & Isa, 2012). The seminar where the faculty member and AI facilitators met provided both the mentoring and collegial support called for in the literature on early-stage doctoral research (Arhar et al., 2013; Coryell et al., 2013, Dinkelman et al., 2012). The AI facilitators were members of *two* collegial groups: the seminar group and the AI team they facilitated. Two of the AI facilitators (Breslow and Crowell) carried out the AI in their professional work setting, and the third (Francis) was involved in a project closely related to the professional work he had engaged in for many years before becoming a full-time doctoral student, and to which he planned to return after he finished his doctoral studies. All three AI facilitators, therefore, engaged in authentic AI in their own "laboratory of practice" (Zambo & Isa, 2012, p. 475).

All three of the AI facilitators had mixed feelings about whether their project would be a success. Their trepidation can be attributed in part to the fact that this was the first time any of them had been involved in AI, let alone facilitated a group engaged in AI, but there were other factors at play. There were concerns that AI was overly idealistic, and that it would be difficult to overcome the problem-solving paradigm that all three facilitators believed was inculcated in K-16 education. Additionally, there were traces of what Coryell et al. (2013) found in their study of doctoral students learning to be researchers, including "struggling with feelings of inadequate knowledge and capability, risk of exposure, and intimidation during the research process" (p. 379).

The progress made through the phases of AI varied among the three AI facilitators. Crowell led her group through all four phases, Breslow's group ended the formal AI after the design phase, and Francis's group initiated the destiny phase but the AI participants were left to finish their various local AI projects on their own. It seems clear from these results that AI, even with small groups, cannot be put on a timeline; it needs to proceed in an open-ended manner.

All of the projects experienced periods of difficulty that the doctoral students overcame. Early in their AI, both Breslow and Crowell perceived that the AI participants were falling into a problem-solving approach, and in both cases the AI facilitator took action to help the group

move back to an appreciative approach. Breslow engaged in individual discussions with some of his AI participants, and Crowell conducted a group activity to help AI participants' transition from the problem-solving to the appreciative approach. The positive path that both Breslow and Crowell's teams took after they had shifted from a problem-solving to an appreciative approach supports Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran's (2011) argument for appreciative inquiry:

> By getting people to focus on their strengths, AI changes the conversation from complaining to celebrating. By noticing and amplifying the good things that are going on, AI turns the tables on old conversation patterns about what is wrong and who is to blame. As the search for scapegoats subsides, the safety required for innovation, risk taking, and learning grows. People become more open, forthcoming, and confident. (p. 444)

Francis faced his own problem when two of the five initial participants dropped out, after which he refocused his efforts on helping the remaining participants through the process and learning more about AI. The experiences of the AI facilitators indicate the need for the facilitator to be both innovative and flexible.

All three of the AI facilitators believed that they and the AI participants adhered to the principles of AI (constructionist, simultaneity, poetic, anticipatory, and positive) throughout their inquiry. The AI facilitators were able to describe strategies they used to foster the principles as well as indicators of the principles at work. Despite the fact that only one of the three groups completed all four phases of AI, all three AI facilitators reported several positive outcomes from the AI. The inquiry process, driven by the five principles, seems to have led to positive change for AI participants, including increased reflectivity, increased commitment to dialogue and collaboration, and personal and professional growth, even in the two AI projects that did not complete the destiny phase. It is possible that the first two phases of AI (discovery and dream phases), with the five principles guiding them and the subsequent AI, may lead the group or organization in a positive direction without the need for highly structured design and destiny phases. Bushe (2011) notes, "One might argue that the discovery and dream phases create the conditions for self-organizing processes to coalesce in positive directions" (p. 94).

The AI facilitators all reported that they had learned much from their first effort at facilitating AI. All three facilitators reported that they had learned about the tremendous potential of AI and the importance of the five principles. The AI facilitators also reported that, as a result of their initial experience with AI, they were well prepared to facilitate AI in the future. At least as far as AI was concerned, the AI facilitators had developed self-confidence, a sense of self-determination (Coryell et al., 2013), and a "relationship with the research process itself" (Arhar et al., 2013, p. 228).

Recommendations

Although the specific results of this study cannot be generalized to other educational settings, we offer some general recommendations for educational leaders contemplating or initiating AI to consider in relationship to their own educational context. We recommend that the AI team decide on a specific, concrete focus area for AI. As Breslow suggested in his reflections on AI, if the

aims of AI are complex, it may be best to start with a short-term goal and simpler AI project, and to progress incrementally through recurring cycles of AI toward the long-term aims.

The three AI facilitators in this study used reflective activities and questions very effectively as they guided their group through AI. Throughout all phases of AI, but especially in the earlier phases, the power of the facilitator providing reflective activities and asking reflective questions cannot be overestimated, and we recommend that the facilitator consider and prepare such activities and questions in advance of each group session.

The AI facilitators, including the two whose groups that did not complete the destiny phase, reported positive outcomes for the AI participants and for themselves. Although it would have been preferable for all three of the groups to have completed all four phases of AI, strict adherence to the four phases may not be as important as following AI's five principles. Indeed, it may be possible for the five principles to operate within a different structure altogether and still lead to positive results. The future of AI may include practitioner–researchers exploring different structures for AI, with the principles of AI remaining its guiding force. Finally, we believe that implementing AI as a continuous cycle, with one AI leading into the next, is the best way to make AI a part of the educational community's culture—indeed, to transform the educational community into a culture of inquiry.

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