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An appreciative inquiry into the transformative learning experiences of students in a family literacy project

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Educational discourse has often struggled to genuinely move beyond deficit-based language. Even action research, a predominant model for teacher development, starts with the identification of a problem (Cardno 2003). It would appear that the vocabulary for a hope-filled discourse which captures the imagination and influences our future educational activity seems to have escaped us. Moreover, we seem bereft of educational contexts where the experience for students is holistic and transformative.

Appreciative inquiry is a research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on participants' actual experiences of best practice

(Cady & Caster 2000, Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987, English, Fenwick & Parsons 2003, Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998). Based on assumptions that 'in every organisation something works' and 'if we are to carry anything of our past forward in our lives, it should be the good things', appreciative inquiry energises participants to reach for higher ideals (Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998). Rather than giving priority to the problems in our current practice, appreciative inquiry gives attention to evidence of successful practice. In this way, proponents describe it as 'dream forming' and 'destiny creating'. This paper will outline an appreciative inquiry with adult students in the context of a tertiary bridging program. The inquiry was able to capture the students' stories of transformative learning experiences.

What are we aiming for in education?

From earliest times, the central thrust of education has been the fullest development of students' characters and understandings. The development was seen as a holistic formation (Bennett 1997). The interactions between the teacher and students provide the context for this transformative experience wherein the purpose and process of education was understood to be intentionally interactive and transformative. Holistic and transformative educational processes, then, attend to the fullest development of learners including their characters, understandings and skills – described in current literature as focusing on the head, heart and hands (Kuk 1993, Loup & Koller 2005). Indeed, an educated person was said to exhibit virtues such as thoughtfulness and hospitality as well as appropriately demonstrate their civic responsibilities (Bennett 1997). Formal learning contexts were supported by informal social contexts where teachers and students, and indeed the wider community, interacted together. In this way, teachers became known to their students and their families and vice versa (Palmer 1993, 1997, 1998).

In becoming known, teachers must then grow in their appreciation of the extent to which they purposely engage with their students as opposed to unnecessary role playing (Palmer 1998, 1999). The critical point here is that, whether consciously aware of it or not, the teaching and learning exchange is holistic and influential (Taylor 1998). Education involves an awareness and sensitivity to the many dynamic relationships between teacher and students and the facilitation of the exchanges between students (Palmer 1998).

Proponents of transformative education identify the discourse within the teaching-learning process as another critical factor which significantly influences students. Mezirow (1991) considers the dialogue of the teaching-learning process to be the medium for deeper and reflective learning, supporting students who critically reflect on their assumptions and beliefs as part of the learning process. Dialogue, then, is much more than a transmission of information. Dialogue implies an energetic exchange between a teacher and student that is open-ended. Schugurensky (2002) suggests that when teachers and students 'have the opportunity to actively participate in deliberation and decision making in the institutions that have most impact on their everyday lives, they engage in substantive learning and can experience both incremental and sudden transformations' (p.67). Rather than advocating greater dialogue in traditionalist ways, the concept of dialogue calls for a type of conversation that engages values and beliefs. Freire (1993) suggests that educational praxis that allows for deep engagement is best facilitated through a comprehensive reconsideration of the process of education. Reconsidering the breadth of relationships within the learning environment opens the thought of education being about a community of relationships (Giles 2003, hooks 2003, Palmer 1998). In this way, teacher and student are seen as essential parts of the educative project.

Avoiding the derailment of education

In contrast to the ideals expressed above, many education systems around the world are still being heavily influenced by an economic rationalist, or New Right, ideology (Billot 2003). Shifting from the ideal of holistic formation, this ideology prizes efficiency in the educational process, the assessment of prescribed learning outcomes, and an educational infrastructure that adopts the language of business. Education is viewed as a business, with educational providers competing for the services of its student-clients, invoiced for this opportunity in the name of user-pays (Butterworth & Tarling 1994, Grace 1991, Snook 1991).

Of significance is the shift in the purpose and process of education towards an individualistic, independent and academic focus alone – a stark contrast to former ideals. Perpetuated by vocationally-based qualification frameworks that have difficulty embracing broader educational goals, it is not surprising that our students are experiencing an educational system that appears to be primarily concerned with its own efficiency, and advocating a fragmented and bitsy curriculum with associated evidence-based assessment systems. Moreover, the priority given to quality assurance and compliance requirements institutionally ensures that management of these organisations is preoccupied with sustaining the *status quo*. Educators, and indeed our future pioneers in education, must now language our present educational scenario in a way that is dialogue-enabling. Hope-filled dialogue is required with a view to restoring holistic and transformative educational practice as the norm for our students.

Methodology: the use of appreciative inquiry

It is to this end that the appreciative inquiry approach is being championed in this paper as an approach that enables dialogue that is restorative, generative and hope-filled (Bushe & Coetzer 1995, Cady & Caster 2000, Cooperrider & Whitney 1999, Elliot 1999, English, Fenwick & Parsons 2003, Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998, Reed, Pearson, Douglas, Swinburne & Wilding 2002, Watkins & Mohr 2001). A key assumption within this approach is that, 'if we bring the past forward, we should bring the best' (Hammond 1998, p.21). The appreciative inquiry approach can enable a renewed sense of purpose and the development of shared understandings as to the nature and purpose of education in the future. Critically important here is that the appreciative inquiry approach sustains a concern for the relational and contextual nature of education, a concern that appears to be lost under the prevailing economic rationalist ideology.

An appreciative inquiry is initiated in the participants' stories of best practice, those moments when the educational practice is in accord with the values that underpin the practice. Additional information is then gathered through the consideration of ideal educational experiences. This part of the process involves the answering of a 'miracle question' (Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998). After these stories are caught, the group processes of constructing provocative propositions and an associated action plan commences. In this way, the power of appreciative inquiry is seen in its ability to draw participants into the process of describing and speculating upon actual stories. Importantly, the participants' stories provide a grounded-ness to the dialogue about future educational experiences.

This paper describes the findings of an appreciative inquiry within the context of a bridging program for adults entering a tertiary institution for the first time. The research approach enabled the capture of students' accounts of transformative learning experiences (Mezirow 1991, Mezirow & Associates 2000).

Background to the inquiry

The students in this research are part of an innovative family literacy program that involves practical experiences with their own children in a nearby school and a monthly group outing which involves the adult students and their families. Up to ninety percent of the students in this study have had limited or unsuccessful experiences in mainstream public schooling and, for some, this program was their first experience of studying for many years. As a consequence, one of the main aims of the program is to make the learning experience enjoyable and worthwhile, while giving the students the opportunities to grow and develop in their role as parents.

The purpose and nature of the research

There is considerable literature regarding the retention rates of students in tertiary bridging programs. Walker (2008) notes the need for tertiary institutions to understand and address the learning needs of a growing and diverse student population as a priority for the retention of students. Rather than fit into the existing culture of the institution, the institutional culture needs to better fit the needs of these diverse students (Zepke & Leach 2005). Indeed, Anderson (2001) suggests that bridging education should never be at the expense of an individual's culture, class or gender. The first year in tertiary study is also recognised as important to the retention of students (Anderson 2007, Mabbett, Schmidt & Houston 2005, Walker 2008, Waters 2003, Watson, Johnson & Austin 2004). The retention of students is influenced by the nature of the transition and adjustment to tertiary study. Indeed, positive initial experiences can lead to purposeful engagement and retention (Anderson 2007).

The observation of the researchers was that students in this program appeared to sustain their commitment. The purpose of this research was to appreciatively appraise those social interactions that were occurring between teacher and students that had a positive impact on the students. The research considered feedback from past and present students in the program. The students recalled the nature of the learning environment they had experienced and the extent to which this had influenced them as learners. The study sought information on what the students perceived to be working well, as Appreciative

Inquiry works on the assumption that whatever you want more of already exists (Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998).

The research sought to identify common themes within the students' stories. The appreciative inquiry sought to answer the following research question: What are the positive aspects of the social dimension of the learning environment that most impacted the students in this bridging program?

Actioning appreciative inquiry

A range of research techniques was utilised which included focus groups, observational journals, individual interviews and written documentation.

Focus groups

Initially, informal group interviews were conducted with all the students from a particular year-group. While participation in these group meetings was voluntary, with students having the right to withdraw from the study at any time, all eleven members of a particular year-group agreed to participate in this inquiry. The discussions were transcribed for analysis. The questions asked within the focus group were:

1. Can you provide two significant memories you have about your learning within the program?
2. If your learning in the program could be perfect for you everyday, what would the learning environment be like?
3. What social aspects of the learning community have most contributed to your success?

Observational journal

In the course of the research, the researcher's personal observations were recorded across a period of four months. The researcher was present during the whole program as a participant observer (Crotty 1998).

Individual interviews

In addition to the focus group, each student was individually interviewed with a view to ascertaining other stories.

Written documentation

A range of written documentation was available for inclusion in this research project. This documentation included students' ongoing feedback and informal writing on the positive and influential aspects of their program. Unexpectedly, one student had kept a personal journal of her experiences from the start of the course. This was voluntarily and confidentially offered to the researchers for use in the research.

Findings

There were numerous recurrent themes within the students' stories. These themes are summarised as follows:

- the role taken by the adult educator is critical for the students
- the atmosphere for learning must be socially enabling
- the educational outcomes must recognise the wider family
- bridging education must be inclusive of all the students.

The role taken by the adult educator is critical for the students

While the educator is required to wear many hats in the course of their work, it is important that he/she develops warm, reciprocal relationships with the students such as friend, confidant, companion and teacher. A sample of the students' comments illustrates this:

- You have been 'a tutor who can be a friend as well'.
- As 'a tutor [you have been] so flexible, just to meet my needs'.
- '[The] teacher has [been a] major influence [that] has inspired me.'
- 'As [the] tutor is easy to talk to, [we] can come to her with anything, even when she is not cool with it; it is okay.'

- You have been 'a tutor that cared about me and my family. [You] made me feel special, made [this place] where I wanted to be, apart from home.'

Taylor (1998) contends that the role of the adult educator in building trust and facilitating the development of sensitive relationships amongst students is fundamental to the fostering of transformative learning. As a member of the learning community, the teacher sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model, demonstrating a willingness to learn and in turn be influenced.

The atmosphere for learning must be socially enabling

The students clearly identified the importance of having fun while learning as well as the value of being able to share their experiences with other students. The students recognised the importance of a warm, supportive, non-threatening and enjoyable environment. Some of the students commented:

- Normal 'class activities involved working with each other'.
- We were able to 'mix and mingle with others in a comfortable zone'.
- We were 'getting to know and accept other people through talking, games and group activities'.

Sefa Dei (2002) suggests that people are continually forming their connections with others; adult educators need to provide a learning environment where students can support each other and develop warm and equitable relationships. By promoting interactions where experiences and ideas are shared, and by developing the concept of a caring environment, students are more likely to foster support and trust with each other.

The educational outcomes must recognise the wider family

Stories from the students readily identified the importance of involving their wider family on their learning journey. In this way, opportunity is provided for students to celebrate and share their learning experiences with others from within the learning environment and with those from outside of it. The family was seen as essential in providing support and encouragement. The program's commitment to upskill the students' parenting skills through the involvement and inclusion of the wider family enabled this commitment to be seen. The students recalled times when their wider family was involved:

- The '[family] night concert [had] mixed cultures, fun, [and an] acceptance of other cultures'.
- You got 'to know my kids, spending time with my child'.
- We were able to meet 'everyone's family and partners'.
- Family '[night] in the hall, what a fantastic night'.

Bridging education must be inclusive of all the students

Creating an inclusive, caring and respectful learning environment is important for students. A sense of community is what binds the students together and in turn generates its own value system. Tisdell (1995:79) suggests that what happens in any learning environment in terms of inclusiveness will depend on 'who the adult educator is, … the educational context … and on who the participants in the learning activity are'. The research suggested that inclusiveness can be achieved in creative ways, as shown by the students:

- We 'help and get help from others'.
- We were 'not being judgemental'.
- We 'are getting to know the other students [and are] more inclusive of their cultures now'.
- We 'learnt to ask for support [and knew that] people are there to help'.

Appraising the process

The use of appreciative inquiry in this research has allowed previously unsuccessful students to identify personal experiences that show their success in their tertiary studies. Moreover, the inquiry allowed students to hear each other's stories in a way that strengthened the relationships within the learning environment. Appreciative Inquiry is well suited to reflective dialogue that establishes a view of the future that is drawn from grounded and past experiences.

Concluding comments

This research suggests that amidst an education system with priorities and values that appear incongruent with the central concerns of education, there are educators pioneering educational contexts where students' learning is holistic and transformative. Indeed, the positive aspects of the social dimension of the learning environment can be both experienced and articulated by the students within the process. The adult educators in this tertiary program have been intentional in providing educational experiences that influence students within the context of their family. The findings of this research show that the influence of the program extends to the interdependent and interconnected aspects of the learning community. The process of conducting an appreciative inquiry has enabled a new discourse to emerge that is hope-filled amongst students whose previous experience of education has been unsuccessful. The use of the appreciative inquiry approach has enabled the imaginative capturing, and speculation, of educational experiences that results from the rich and grounded stories.

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