Using Appreciative Inquiry to explore the professional practice of a lecturer in higher education: Moving towards life-centric practice

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This paper reports on a strategy for exploring the life-centric practice of a lecturer in Higher Education. The initiative for this inquiry arose out of the realisation that there did not appear to be positive, heart-lifting stories in a lecturer's current teaching experiences. Using an appreciative eye and supported by a critical friend, life-giving experiences were 'stalked' from the past. The hope in this endeavour was to find greater meaning in the lecturer's best professional practice. Using an Appreciative Inquiry approach, this endeavour rejuvenated the lecturer's professional practice. As life-centric stories were recalled, provocative propositions were constructed that became the basis of a personalised action plan for future professional practice. This paper outlines the nature of the journey and the heartfelt discoveries.

Introduction

On an educator's personal journey towards greater congruency and authenticity, the workplace can be challenging and, at times, life-less (Bhindi & Duignan 1997, Brook 2009, Gibbs 2006). In these times, educators can lose their sense of purpose and feel an alienation from colleagues and students. Moreover, this negative, problem-centered way of being can engender deficit-based thinking on the part of the educator. What possibilities exist if the lense shifts from seeing oneself as a problem to be solved to seeing oneself as a complex miracle to be appreciated? How would this influence the nature of an inquiry into an individual's professional practice and what opportunities might exist for understanding one's future practice (Giles & Alderson 2008, Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2003)? These thought-provoking questions target particular life-giving moments in an individual's professional practice as the basis for an alternative way of looking.

English, Fenwick and Parsons (2003) suggest that the use of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers a way of effecting a positive vision for professional practice. Cooperrider and others (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987, Hammond 1998, Hammond & Royal 1998, Ryan Soven Smither William & Vanbuskirk 1999, Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2003) maintain that the process of appreciative inquiry itself is intervention, that is, an inquiry into human activity and systems change the inquirers. It is as if, 'The seeds of change—that is, the things people think and talk about, the things people discover and learn, and the things that inform dialogue and inspire images of the future—are implicit in the very first questions we ask' (Cooperrider Sorenson Whitney & Yaegar 2000: 18). In other words, our way of being and our professional practice is influenced the moment questions are asked and questions are sought. In contrast, problem-centred constructions of reality can lead to a greater sense of hopelessness. Bushe and Coetzer (1995: 5) suggest that 'the theories

we hold ... have a powerful effect on the nature of social reality. Not only do we see what we believe, but the very act of believing it creates it'. For this reason, AI is targeted at appreciating what it is about the social world that is positive, while exploring the possibilities of making the essence of these experiences happen again in the future.

Underpinning Appreciative Inquiry is the challenge to systematically consider positive stories of professional practice (Hammond & Royal 1998). In this way, 'every new affirmative projection of the future is a consequence of an appreciative understanding of the past or present' (Bushe & Coetzer 1995). Hammond (1998) suggests that, if anything is brought from the past, it ought to be the best of the past that is brought forward. It is critically important in the process that actual, grounded and uplifting stories from the past are recalled for deliberation and contemplation. Such stories show moments where practice is in harmony with who we are (Giles & Alderson 2004, 2008).

In the best scenario, AI results in a generative metaphor that calls for and compels new action (Bushe & Kassam 2005). Generative metaphors are seen as 'sayings or phrases that are themselves provocative, and can create new possibilities for action, that people had not previously considered' (Bushe & Kassam 2005: 4). Proust (cited in Bushe & Kassam 2005: 4) explains that 'the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes'. The appreciative process involves practising an appreciative eye over past experiences in the quest to find the beauty in specific events (Hammond 1998). Hammond (1998: 2) goes further to suggest that the excitement generated in looking for best practice 'energizes both the researcher and participants alike to reach for higher ideals'.

Methodology: Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) have proposed a set of principles to guide Appreciative Inquiry. The purpose of such inquiry is the

creation of generative theory which articulates future possibilities (Bushe & Kassam 2005).Appreciative Inquiry begins with the telling and recording of life-centric stories. Given that our lives are articulated continuously and collectively in the stories we tell each other every day, stories have power to be used as catalysts of change. The seeds of change are embedded in the stories that are told. In this way, change happens the moment we begin to inquire (Bushe & Kassam 2005)**.** The mom**e**ntum for sustainable change requires positive affect and a relational connection to a colleague or critical friend (Giles 2008, Giles & Alderson 2004, 2008, Mantel & Ludema 2000). A critical friend can be a colleague or associate with whom a trusting relationship exists. In addition, the critical friend must have an understanding of the appreciate process and be skilful in seeking taken-for-granted aspects of an-other's stories.

The principles of Appreciative Inquiry are incorporated in a four-step framework (Cooperrider *et al.* 2000, Hammond 1998, Mohr & Watkins 2001, Reed Pearson Douglas Swinburne & Wilding 2002). The first step in the framework is described as the 'discovery' step. This step has the intent of describing the best of 'what has been' and 'what is'. The best aspects of an individual's peak professional practice are identified, appreciated, recalled and told in story form as descriptively as possible. In this way, Appreciative Inquiry is grounded in the actual experiences of an individual (Giles & Alderson 2008). Insights are sought into what made the particular story a peak experience (Bushe 1999). Hammond (1998) describes this as gently investigating the root cause of successful practice.

The second step in the framework is described as the 'dream' step. This step considers what our practice could look like if we were fully aligned around our strengths and aspirations. In this way, this second step imagines what might be possible within our professional practice on the basis of our past stories. This step is intentionally generative.

The third step in the framework is described as the 'design' step. In this step, the educator and critical friend co-construct 'possibility propositions' that are value statements that challenge taken-for-granted *status quo* assumptions in the practice stories (Giles & Alderson 2008, Hammond 1998). In this way, the co-construction involves the drawing together of common themes from across the personal experiences in order to create provocative propositions that act as challenging value statements. These statements are intentionally designed to be stretching and provocative, and capture qualities that are most desired (English *et al.* 2003). The articulation of emergent themes typically requires the support of a facilitator or critical friend.

The final step in the AI framework is described as the 'destiny' step. In this step, a set of intentions for practice are developed in the form of an action plan. The action planning process seeks to sustain the opportunities and possibilities drawn and constructed from the original stories. Again, the dialogue with a critical friend is critically important in holding the threads from the stories through into possibilities. It would seem that 'the process is as important as the end product' (Goldberg 2001: 57).

The appreciative process is summed up as 'stalking' the life-centric flow within an individual's past experiences which leads to an 'amplification through fanning' of the elements that have contributed to the exemplary or peak performance (English *et al.* 2003).

Background to the inquiry

This article reports on such an endeavour into the professional practice of a lecturer in higher education. Susie, the lecturer whose practice was considered in this Appreciative Inquiry, had been involved in a number of educational roles. Her teaching career began as an English teacher in Malaysia with subsequent roles as a research and planning officer in the Ministry of Education, Malaysia, a vice-

principal of a high school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a learning support tutor in a Malaysian university, a language teacher in New Zealand, and presently, as a teacher educator in New Zealand. David, the critical friend in this Appreciative Inquiry, completed his doctoral research on the teacher-student relationship (Giles 2008) and lectures on the use of Appreciative Inquiry in the formation of individuals and organisations.

The first step in this inquiry involved Susie recalling and descriptively writing about specific teaching experiences which she identified as experiences which show her peak professional practice. These experiences related to one-on-one interaction with colleagues in her former roles as a deputy principal, lecturer and tertiary educator. These stories are referred to within the discussion of each theme that follows in the findings and discussion section. Most importantly, Susie's stories represented actual experiences of professional practice.

These stories were written descriptively and then re-told in story form to Susie's critical friend, David. David was invited to participate given his research interests in Appreciative Inquiry and Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Giles 2008). The dialogue on the stories and the extrapolation of emergent themes were identified collaboratively.

Findings and discussion

After recording and analysing Susie's stories, the following themes were identified collaboratively as integral to an emergent generative metaphor. It should be noted that the purpose of this paper is to show an alternative discourse on professional practice aided by an AI process rather than a critique of the AI approach itself.

The first theme

The first theme that was co-constructed from the stories was the need as a teacher to 'walk the talk', consistently modelling one's deepest values. Susie's practice is empowered by the firm belief that teachers

are less dispensers of head knowledge than they are 'sources of life and vision' (English *et al.* 2003: 78). As such, students are unique and should be valued. It is this belief that underpins one's relationships with students across time and place (Giles 2008). Memories were recalled of many respectful relationships with students and a ready desire to go the 'extra mile' for students. This desire was embedded in the way Susie's lessons were planned, the way lessons were conducted and the way resources and activities were selected. Previous teaching modules were recalled where students were given the opportunity to look for answers that are deep within themselves in relation to their emergent understandings of teaching and their professional formation.

The valuing of people appeared to be embodied in the way Susie's care was offered to students and the lengths taken to create trusting spaces for open in-class discussions. Freire and Macedo (1995), Mezirow and Associates (2000) and Palmer (1999a, 2000, 2004), amongst others, appeal to teachers to intentionally enter, and meaningful promote, engaging dialogue with learners. Teachers are encouraged to structure 'experiences that invite learners to ask questions of meaning such as Who am I?' (English *et al.* 2003: 79). In a similar way, Ayers (2001) advocates for a sincerity of relationship with students, an outcome of authentic friendships that have a deep caring and compassionate concern.

The proposition that was co-constructed from this theme was that teachers, whose values and beliefs align with their practice, role model an authenticity that enables close relational bonds with their students.

The second theme

The second theme that was co-constructed from the stories was the importance of an alignment between one's personal values and the organisation's values. As a lecturer, Susie is at her best when her

personal culture, values and beliefs align with the organisation's culture, values and beliefs. Tensions occur when articulated values do not align with individual or organisational practice; that is, the talk is not walked. At times, the words used to describe our valuing appear similar, yet the meanings that are held are different.

In one particular story, the concept of 'valuing people' was viewed differently by different members of the organisation. The teachers' view was that the valuing of people ought to be made visible in practice and permeate the way they teach, assess and provide feedback. Those who guard the business interests of the organisation may say they share a common vision in valuing people, but students were readily seen in economic terms as money earners for the organisation. Value is thus placed on the economics of the client (student) rather than the person who is the student.

Susie recalled times when her professional practice was in harmony, and in alignment, with the organisational values. Earlier career stories led us to initial teaching experiences in Malaysia. Susie recalled having the privilege of a wonderful mentor who led an exemplary life of service to both the school he served and the community at large. This lecturer said that teachers had to be a good human being first and a good educator second. In this way, he walked the talk; his every step showed a valuing of relationship. He inspired Susie saying that she was a custodian of the students' souls. This mentor understood the need to bridge the gap between teachers and students, and his genuineness of spirit touched both staff and students. 'We all know what will transform education is not another theory, or another book, or another formula but educators who are willing to seek a transformed way of being in the world' (Palmer 1999). Leaders are exhorted to 'build the credibility of organizational values … by demonstration, not articulation' (Senge *et al.* 1999: 200).

The proposition that was co-constructed on this theme was that teachers need to regularly consider the alignment between their own values and practices with the organisation's values and practices.

The third theme

A third theme that was co-constructed from the stories was the notion that students are holistic beings. Indeed, the holistic nature of students needs to be affirmed and encouraged in practice. Susie was at her best when her teaching reflects this core belief. As Gibbs (2004: 7) suggests, education should be a source of nurturance for the spirit as well as a means of reaching understanding. In a story from her second year of teaching, Susie realised that she was not connecting with one of her students. In frustration, one day he declared, '*Mengapa selalu berbulu-bulu dengan saya?*' Translated into English, it roughly means, 'Why are we like porcupines? We are always inflicting pain on each other'. This thought-provoking question opened a soul-searching discussion which culminated in better understanding this student's perception of the teacher-student relationship. As the teacher, Susie was given a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of this student's essential being. When they parted ways at the end of the year, they both knew that something special had happened. Three years later, this young man returned to the school to let Susie know how much he had appreciated the care and concern shown that day. Giles and Sanders (1996: 7) note that a sensitive understanding of the multi-faceted nature of relationships helps teachers to 'develop trust through encouragement and sensitivity'.

The proposition that was co-constructed from this theme was that teachers need to sensitise themselves to the holistic influence of their interactions with students.

The final theme

The final theme that emerged from the stories related to the teacher's awareness of their own 'times and seasons'. Susie is at her best when she is aware of the 'times and seasons' in her life personally and professionally. Over a teaching career of more than 26 years, themes and patterns were identified that were loosely described as relating to 'times and seasons'. The appreciative process enabled a greater awareness of the different seasons in Susie's personal and professional life. Recollecting stories enables the realisation of how much a teacher can feel alienated from the core of who they are when they work in organisations that do not practise a genuine caring concern for humankind, instead of embracing differences as unique and for celebration.

The provocative proposition co-constructed from this theme was that teachers' professional development needs to be ongoing and linked to an increased awareness of the twists and turns in their personal and professional lives.

A summary of the propositions is as follows:

Themes	Propositions
1	Teachers, whose values and beliefs align with their practice, role model an authenticity that enables close relational bonds with their students.
2	Teachers need to regularly consider the alignment between their own values and practices with the organisation's values and practices.
3	Teachers need to sensitise themselves to the holistic influence of their interactions with students.
4	Teachers' professional development needs to be ongoing and linked to an increased awareness of the twists and turns in their personal and professional lives.

Each provocative proposition has been considered in terms of the action that would be necessary to enable Susie, as the lecturer, to experience further life-giving moments of professional practice. The following table identifies specific action in relation to each proposition. The subsequent action plan is as follows:

Proposition	Related Action	When
1	Reflect on one's professional practice with regard to the nature of my teacher-student relationships.	Before each semester and ongoing.
	Seek ongoing and informal feedback with regard to my teacher-student relationships.	Ongoing, and at the end of each semester.
2	Articulate a personal philosophy for education and teaching as a living document (for regular review) as an empowering strategy for engaging towards greater authenticity within the wider organisational values and practices.	Articulate a personal philosophy as soon as possible. To be reviewed each semester at least.
	Informally engage with immediate line managers over concernful discrepancies between one's own practices and that of the organisation.	As practices are noted.
3	Establish a reflective journal for recording moments/experiences which capture attention given to individual students. Phenomenologically reflect on the nature of the influence of such moments by writing interpretive statements about such events.	Set up a journal as soon as possible. Aim for the inclusion of at least one new experience per month with a subsequent interpretive statement.
4	At least twice a year, and preferably monthly, review monthly and annual goals being concerned about the progress, relevance and meaningfulness of such goals.	Twice yearly.

Conclusion

The Appreciative Inquiry process exhorts participants to have an appreciation for the mystery of being and a reverence for life (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987). Such a process calls for an exploration of life-giving forces which support an individual's best practice. This positive, possibility-focused awakening is due to the challenge to look at one's professional practice with new eyes.

Stories are a powerful tool for regeneration. Telling and re-gathering stories enables greater meaning to be found in everyday life-centric experiences and, in the process, enables the rediscovery of one's true voice in an educator's professional practice. The seeds of change are planted the moment we inquire. This AI experience energised a lecturer to reach for higher ideals in their professional practice.

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Susie Kung has an active interest in the characteristics of effective teachers. Such teachers appear to know who they are, and how they are called to the teacher's role. Susie's consideration of these matters opens a re-consideration of the nature of teacher education as a holistic endeavour.

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