

Creating Conversational Spaces on Campus: Connecting Students & Faculty Through Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning

John Chetro-Szivos and Patrice Gray

Fitchburg State College

The authors discuss their use of Appreciative Inquiry coupled with Circular Questioning to create what they have titled a Conversational Space. They discuss their experiences using conversational spaces in several venues across their campus: in classrooms, in campus-wide faculty discussions, and in informal and formal student and faculty discussions outside of the classroom. The results suggest that this system of inquiry becomes a way of talking, imagining, and working together that can transform teaching and learning. The authors describe both Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning and the applied uses in these settings. They point out how this application can assist people to conjointly create patterns of practice that are life changing and allow them to enjoy and live their story of success in an academic setting.

In everyday life, most people are constrained by the perception that their resources are limited. Even in college and university settings where the focus is on teaching and learning, we often hear a language of deficit when faculty and students talk about each other. At the worst, faculty may blame students for their academic insufficiencies (“Students can’t write, can’t read, can’t think”), and students blame faculty for an inability to meet their affective needs (“Professor X doesn’t care about my ‘real’ life.”). Further, if we see what is occurring between students and faculty as problematic, our perceptions will work as a constraining force. Perceptions based on deficits and the talk that follows impose constraints on our imagination and ability to offer the kinds of educational experiences both student and teacher have envisioned.

In our search to offer students better educational experiences and to become better teachers, we have called upon Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning as methods that can create a different kind of experience. These methods provide us with the tools to create what we call a “conversational space” in both classrooms and across campus. At Fitchburg State College, a small liberal arts college in Central Massachusetts, our collaboration began in a Writing Across the Curriculum discussion group, with a series of meetings for faculty from various disciplines to talk about writing issues. From the onset, this small group of faculty began a conversation atypical of such open-ended faculty discussions; rather than complain about students as faculty often do, we began to talk about our small successes in our classes and about our students as the

complex and interesting people we know them to be. It became apparent to us that the language we were using had preempted deficit talk and had provided us a grammar of possibility. Through the use of Circular Questioning, faculty could articulate ways in which we could witness change and growth in ourselves and in our students. Such methods also transferred into our classroom practices, in which we created conversational spaces in classrooms for our students to talk about their learning. A classroom conversational space is not just effective pedagogy; it is a way of thinking and interacting with members of the campus community both in and across classes.

Since these early meetings, the writers of this paper have experimented with the use of Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning in several venues across campus: in our various disciplinary communication and composition classrooms, from first year to senior; in campus-wide faculty discussions; and in informal student and faculty discussions outside of the classroom. Our results suggest that this system of inquiry, a way of talking, imagining, and working together, can transform teaching and learning.

The Role of Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning in Academic Settings

Appreciative Inquiry starts with the premise that we have a choice in terms of what we see and how we act. We do not have to focus on problems and deficits as traditional problem-solving approaches have done; we can choose to see possibilities by shifting to a future orientation and calling upon what has worked or what have been the most moving moments in the experiences of students. The ability to transform our classes and our teaching rests in shifting our focus to what is right rather than what is wrong. The energy of possibility may provide the confidence and the aesthetic to develop and pursue a new image of the future. Simply put, we are more likely to inspire, mobilize, and sustain student learning by focusing on what can be rather than what does not work.

Appreciative Inquiry also rests on the belief that people jointly create the social worlds they live within,

a perspective consistent with the theory of social constructionism. It is a method to provide conversational spaces in the classroom that helps students and faculty engage in an active search for solutions, amplify what is working, and focus on life-giving forces. Clearly, this model moves faculty far beyond the current critical thinking discourse to a place where we can question, ponder, and experience the aesthetics of what we do.

Most of all, Appreciative Inquiry is a system of inquiry that invites the participants' active involvement into the process. It becomes a way of talking, imaging, and working together with students and colleagues. Appreciative Inquiry is interventive because of its ability to allow people to see connections between the stories they tell, live, and can create. A teacher working in this way seeks to join with students in a process of co-constructing new stories that enable them to move forward.

We have coupled Appreciative Inquiry with Circular Questioning not only to facilitate and explore conversations, but we have found Circular Questioning to be an effective method of inquiry and a catalyst for change. The value of Circular Questions lies in its ability to assist people to think of how one thing is related to another, probe the meaning of terms they call upon to describe their situation, explore the aesthetics of their experience, and ask what can be carried forward to construct better stories.

Circular Questioning differs from others forms of interviewing in significant ways. At the very core of the concept of Circular Questioning is the idea that there are connections among people within a system such as a family, organization, or students in a classroom; and a connection between the interviewer and the individuals. The interviewer conducts the inquiry on the basis of feedback from the participants in response to the information that has been solicited about the relationship or their patterns of interaction. Circular Questioning might sound like real conversation with each response of the respondent followed by a question by the interviewer, but as Tomm (1987) pointed out, even though what takes place may sound like conversation, it is not real conversation because the interviewer's purpose is to gather information and promote new ways of thinking for the participants. Students construct thoughts, which may seem logical to themselves and others, but perhaps are not. Logical statements may

not say anything about what is in the world. Finding what can be in the world is possible as we attempt to unravel grammatical confusions. Circular Questions provide the direction to help students to imagine, inquire, and understand life as a student. For example, while in the conversational space we often ask students to think of the best moments of learning and what kinds of stories do they want to tell about their experiences at college. We explore their ideas through questions in order to find the different ways to make sense of what is present in the context and what can be.

The Basic Assumptions of Appreciative Inquiry

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) are credited with articulating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a method of organizational intervention. They predicated their model on the following eight assumptions, all of which have applications to the academic arena:

1. *In every society, organization, or group something works.* We point to the fact that even in places where there is tension and conflict, people are committed to stay in the struggle and fight for something different. If we can discover what is working in a classroom for our students, we can begin to imagine and work towards different experiences.
2. *What we focus on becomes our reality.* Human action is critically dependent on the world as perceived rather than the world as it is. Exploring our perceptions may lead to understanding about what constrains us, or it may offer the ability to change our reality. This exploration has particular relevance with students who may feel constrained by stories about failure, boredom, or teachers who do not care. Similar stories may be held by educators who are constrained by stories of students who are not committed to learning.
3. *Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.* All social action is open to multiple interpretations, and all observations are filtered through a lens of some kind. These assumptions create possibilities and affordances for change and a different type of educational experience for students and faculty.
4. *The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.* Appreciative Inquiry recognizes that communication is the primary social process that creates, sustains, and changes our realities. We have coupled AI with the process of Circular Questioning to amplify the communication process. The process of asking open “circular” questions engages the participants in a dialogue where the grammars (language, behavior, and feelings) present in a context can be explored and connections can be made to stories lived and stories told by the participants so that they can create a better story.
5. *People have more comfort and confidence to imagine the future when they carry forward parts of the past.* The Circular Questioning method helps to link the past and the present to the future so students can imagine what can be and how to attain this image.
6. *If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.* In the process of exploration, we explore what are the beautiful or most moving moments of living and working where life has a “fit.” The aesthetic of these moments can be called upon to make connections with the kind of world we want to create together.
7. *It is important to value differences.* When living and working with others we are faced with the challenge of moving from an ethnocentric perspective to a more cosmopolitan view. A cosmopolitan point of view tells us to be more mindful of the process of how people construct their own stories and to recognize there are differences among stories. We see ways to make sense of stories and the everyday practices of people. This process begins with the practice of taking our beliefs and the beliefs of others seriously. In other words, our goal is to find respect for the different stories students may have about their lives and experiences.
8. *The language we use creates our reality.* Our accounts of what is going on are derived from our interaction. Our vocabularies of understanding grow and change through social interaction, processes of negotiation, working through conflict, improvisation, and joint action. We live in and by the language we use. This awareness is particularly important in a classroom and should call upon our ability to assess

what we do more than examine the dialogues we have with students.

Circular Questioning and Its Uses

We have been influenced by the work of the Milan Team of systemic family therapists who used Circular Questioning in their work. They would ask their clients to look at the multiple connections among the elements in their social worlds, explore alternative descriptions of the connections among them, and join the therapists in a process of co-constructing new stories that helped them move forward (Tomm, 1987). We propose that a similar process can take place in the classroom.

The application of Circular Questioning is not limited to therapeutic contexts. Essentially, Circular Questioning is applicable to all settings where people live and work. Cronen and Lang (1994) stated that living in and by communication tells us that all living is done in relations with others and that living is action dependent upon others. Cronen and Lang (1996) discussed the essential features of what makes Circular Questions circular. They found that Circular Questioning allows the researcher to explore the grammar used by the members of a system to determine the specific connection of meaning and how the grammar of the system is organized. In fact, interviewers call on the actual grammar used by the participants to enter into the system of meaning and explore what rules are at work. Circular Questions connect the participants with episodes of interaction by asking questions like “who is most concerned?” or questions that explore the sequences of events within an episode such as “what happens next?” Circular Questions are concerned with the circularity of time as the researcher explores how the past and future relate to the present. Cronen and Lang stated that each utterance is connected to past, present, and future. Circular Questions explore the connection across stories by asking what other events and actions are going on in the lives of the members of a system.

In talking with the teacher, a student may find how his or her story fits together and is enacted in everyday life. Because the hierarchy of stories is not dependent on a linear logic, the arrangement of the student’s story may change in the course of the interview as new understandings are formed. Through the

use of Circular Questioning, we are interested in moving understandings of what has happened from linear explanations to circular ones. Interviewing in this way means following a story about an episode, and not seeking to enhance a linear explanation of behavior. Instead, the intent is to elicit from the interviewee an articulation of the systemic relationships at work in this particular episode.

The better stories that students could construct would move from descriptions of all the things that don’t work or those things that are wrong to positive experiences. In our efforts we hope to help students to create stories that are future-oriented, based on imagining, and thinking appreciatively.

Putting Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning to Action

The starting point for a conversational space is a serious commitment to human communication. We see communication as coordinated action that is co-constructed by people in specific episodes. As stated above, we do not see communication as a simple vehicle of message transmission; instead, we regard it as a way that social phenomena are created in the process of conjoint action. All human action is conjoint action, which is to say that the interests and desires of others and the actions of those around us influence what others and we do. Working appreciatively starts with the assumption that student learning is about change. Students come to a college or a university with the goal of change at some level. However the students’ and the educators’ current linguistic and story telling practices have the capacity to hold them in undesirable and unproductive conditions.

In order to create a more positive discourse model for faculty and students talking with students and faculty, we have devised the following questions, which illustrate the possibilities. We have used them in meetings dedicated to explore specific issues about learning or our campus. We have also used this approach within a classroom at different points during the semester. Inquiry in a *conversational space* interview could follow a series of questions such as these¹:

1. Initial question based on affirmative topic choice

- What stories do you hope you will be telling years from now about your classes, education, and you as a student (or faculty member)?
- What are the best things about your school? (approaches to learning, traditions, resources, faculty, or students?)
- What are the unique aspects of the College culture that most positively affect the way you work?

2. Using episodes and stories

- Can you tell us an episode you recall that you felt were the best moments in learning?
- Think of a time in your entire experience in school when you have felt most excited, most engaged, and most alive. What was going on that made it a great experience? What was it about you and others at that time that made it a positive experience for you?

3. Questions to follow the stories that explore the reflexive effects of others in the system

- How do you know when you are doing well in a course?
- If you experienced the kinds of stories you hope will happen, who would be most affected? Who would be the happiest for you?
Who do you think most wants you to succeed?
- At your college who is most important to you and what makes them important?
- How have you shared these stories with others?
- What kind of relationships would we have to have to help these stories come about and what role would you have to play? What ways could others there help you to create the best moments?

4. Using the future to re-frame the present

- What are some things, the smallest things, we can do today to begin to make these stories happen? (al-

ways push for the smallest of things, i.e., “tonight I will go the library”)

- Given what you heard from others and talked about here, what encourages you or tells you these future stories are possible?
- What are the three most important hopes you have for your future?

5. Questions to intervene if the discussion begins to turn to deficit

- What are the things that keep you at this college?
- What are some of the things you are hoping to change here? How is it that you have decided to do it alone?
- (If you need a clearer intervention) How is it that you have decided to stay here when things are so _____ (use their word such as bad, dismal, frustrating, etc.)?
- (If someone were to keep pushing a deficit position, you might try this.) I am not sure how I can help you with what you are saying. Can you tell me the things others in this conversation can do to help you with these issues?

The commitment to communication contends that our social worlds are made through such taken-for-granted factors as the language we use, the questions we ask, and the way we inquire into the world. A move from deficit language to appreciative language creates a different reality, as we are able to organize experiences in another way. Questions that are framed positively as opposed to critically can initiate constructive dialogue. Inquiry could be described as a spiraling process in which ideas come together, are tested by action, and are reformulated in the course of experience (Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2002). It is not the kind of inquiry that attempts to locate certainty. Inquiry here is intended to help students attain a better relationship with the world around them. What we find is that forms of talk, inquiry, and interaction can serve as a way of making the classroom a different place where students can construct better stories about who they are, who they would like to be, and the kind of relations they need to have with others to attain these stories. This communication perspective sees deficit talk as likely to lead to undesirable consequences.

¹ While we develop a general line of questions before the interview, it is important for the interviewer to follow the responses of the interviewee. The reader is encouraged to see Tomm, K. (1987) One perspective of the Milan Systemic Approach. *Family Process*, 26, pp. 38-63.

While focusing on critical scholarship, Gergen (1994) presented five consequences that dissolve or lead to adverse effects on human communities and the production of generative knowledge:

1. The discursive structure of critique starts with an assertion, and this statement creates a linguistic domain in which conversation is constrained to the terms of that assertion, whether “for” or “against.”
2. The critical voice, and those it summons in opposition, silences marginal voices and fragments relationships.
3. Critique erodes community by creating a category of people who are outside or open to attack.
4. The critical impulse maintains patterns of social hierarchy.
5. By focusing on what is wrong, missing, or weak, critique contributes to cultural and organizational enfeeblement.

All too often a classroom can be a place where students and teachers may see themselves engaged in a battle or a conflict. As Gergen indicated, this position and the discourse that accompanies it only weakens the classroom, sustains a disaffirming hierarchy, and may sustain the barriers to good educational practice. In the context of a classroom, Appreciative Inquiry works by creating a space in which students are invited to use appreciative language and to focus on what is desirable, the best moments in learning, and an imagined future story about life. Appreciative Inquiry offers a position that encourages discovery and inquiry into the moments when life has a beautiful fit.

Appreciative Inquiry intervention follows the “4-D” model, which both students and faculty can use to construct their identities as learners:

1. Discovery: searching for, highlighting, and illuminating those factors that give life to a particular setting or valuing the best of what is.
2. Dream: envisioning what could be, liberating participants from the constraining power of existing reality and offering positive guiding images of the future.

3. Design: by creating a deliberately inclusive and supportive context for conversation and interaction, permitting participants to come to an agreement about an ideal of vision that they value and aspire to.
4. Destiny: constructing the future through innovation and action, teaching that students and faculty have a high degree of responsibility for their learning.

The critics of Appreciative Inquiry have regarded it as too Pollyanna-ish and unrealistic because of the constant focus on what is good. Our intention has been to keep the focus on what is working and the future people hope to construct. In doing so we attempt to re-frame deficit language. However, we agree that talking only about what is good is not realistic and that some problem talk provides an opportunity to explore the gap between what is not working and what people had hoped for. We have found that students speaking about a problem can be an invitation to talk of their visions of how things should be. We are also careful to acknowledge that students have been heard even when there is problem talk. We believe that acknowledgement is a preliminary step to co-constructing new stories. This acknowledgement can be done by reflecting about their fascination with stories that prevent them from moving forward productively. It is important to be cautious and not push a student to move immediately to appreciative future-oriented talk or to be too quick to challenge the resistive student. A resistant student could simply go through the motions of an appreciative session. This possible resistance is one of the reasons we have found Circular Questioning as a much more productive method of engaging with the students and entering into his or her grammar; when we enter into a student’s grammar we have a deeper appreciation for the feelings, behavior, and action that are associated with what he or she is saying. This discourse opportunity provides us with a direction to assist the student to re-frame a story and make connections to the ways he or she wants to live and work. It is for this reason that we have found that Circular Questions are most effective when they explore episodes of action and not opinions or general concepts.

Some Final Considerations

When creating conversational spaces through Appreciative Inquiry and Circular Questioning, educators help students move from talk of problems in deficit language to appreciative, future-oriented story building. At the heart of such an intervention is the question of how people tell stories and live stories and how these stories are connected to other stories. A particular logic underlies this approach; talk always comes back to the action that sustains stories. In the episodes that students share, a connection exists between action and what it means to be a successful student. Here actions and feelings are enacted in a certain way. The stories students tell and the stories they live are important aspects of understanding their lives and helping them move toward learning of another kind. The stories here are not regarded as simple accounts of their lives. Instead, these stories can reveal how the students construct their own identities, which make up their social realities of what it is to be a successful student.

What such an intervention suggests is that selfhood and thinking are created in the ongoing course of communication. Therefore, through an active dialogue that moves from deficit to appreciation, people can create their own “better” story of the world. The goal of this type of inquiry is not to discover certitude and primary substances. It is concerned with how people can conjointly create patterns of practice that are life changing and allow them to enjoy and live their story of success.

We feel that coming to know a student is a matter of coming to know the way they use language and the way they talk about their experiences. The purpose of the conversational space is to create a dialogue in which student and faculty member reflect on lived experiences. A conversational space is a means to dialogue about what we think is present and what differences exist within the context that could lead us to a new awareness.

In our collaborative efforts we have created conversational spaces in both our classrooms and across our campuses. The conversational space provides the opportunity for participants to enter into a different discourse. When we have interacted in this way we have witnessed change and growth in ourselves and in our

students. We feel that a small college in many ways serves as the ideal environment for the creation and use of conversational spaces. The smaller number of students and faculty provides a setting where cross-discipline conversations more likely to occur and flourish. We have found within this particular setting, where members share close proximity, many opportunities exist to work appreciatively and create a grammar of possibility.

References

- Bateson, G. (1972) *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company.
- Cooperider, D., & Srivastva, S. (1987) Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In Woodman, R. & Pasmore, W. (eds.) *Research and organizational change and development: Volume 1*, pp. 129-169. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Cronen, V. (1995) Coordinated Management of Meaning: The consequentiality of communication and the recapturing of experience. In S.J. Sigman (Ed.) *The Consequentiality of Communication*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cronen, V. & Chetro-Szivos, J. (2001) Pragmatism as a way of inquiring with special reference to a theory of communication and the general form of pragmatic social theory. In D. Perry (Ed.) *Pragmatism and communication research*. Highland, MD: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cronen, V. & Chetro-Szivos, J. (2002) Consummatory moments and moral order in organizational life. In T.Meisner (Ed.) *A symphony of appreciation*. Stockholm, Denmark: Danish Psychology Press
- Cronen, V., & Lang, P. (1994) Language and action: Wittgenstein and Dewey in the practice of therapy and consultation. *Human Systems: The Journal of Systemic Consultation and Management*, 5, pp. 5-43.
- Cronen, V., & Lang, P. (1996) Circular questions and coordinated management of meaning theory. Unpublished paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Convention, 1996.
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1925) *Experience and nature*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing
- Gergen, K. (1994) *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shusterman, R. (1997) *Practicing philosophy: Pragmatism and the philosophical life*. New York: Routledge.

Tomm, K. (1987) One perspective on the Milan systemic approach. *Family Process* 26, 1987, pp. 38-63.

Wittgenstein, L. (1958) *Philosophical Investigations* (2nd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

John Chetro-Szivos is an Assistant Professor of Communication/Media at Fitchburg State College, Fitchburg, MA. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His research interests include the application of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) in a variety of human systems.

Patrice Gray is an Associate Professor of English and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Fitchburg State College, Fitchburg, MA. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from Emory University. Her research interests include late nineteenth and early twentieth century composition history and practices.

