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AUTHOR Kerka, Sandra
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INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
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ABSTRACT

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is based on the heliotropic principle, which has been variously described as art and science, holistic theory and practice, and practical philosophy and change process. AI engages people and organizations in discovering what gives life to human systems when they are most effective and constructive and using that knowledge to envision and create the preferred future. Instead of beginning with problems to be solved, AI uses a social constructivist view that reality is socially created. AI is rooted in multiple fields, including action research, organizational development, and chaos theory. The principles underlying AI are constructivism, simultaneity, poetics, anticipation, and the positive. The process of AI involves the following activities: (1) discover (talk to one another to identify exceptional/peak moments); (2) dream (envision what might be if the peak moments were the norm); (3) design (develop "provocative propositions" to achieve the vision and strategies to implement them); and (4) deliver (act on provocative propositions, establish new relationships, and mobilize resources). Some critics are concerned that AI glosses over problems. Under the right conditions, AI can be genuinely transformative; however, it requires time, trust, and a "new mental metabolism." (An annotated bibliography listing 23 publications and 3 World Wide Web sites constitutes approximately 75% of this document.) (MN)

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**Appreciative Inquiry
Trends and Issues Alert No. 41**

Sandra Kerka

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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Appreciative Inquiry

Sunflowers, like other heliotropic plants, move toward what gives them life and energy—the sun. The heliotropic principle underlies Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which has been variously described as art and science, holistic theory and practice, and practical philosophy and change process (Watkins and Mohr 2001; Zemke 1999). AI engages people and organizations in discovering what gives life to human systems when they are most effective and constructive and using that knowledge to envision and create the preferred future (Cooperrider et al. 2000). Instead of beginning with problems to be solved, AI uses a social constructivist view that reality is socially created, and people can choose to focus on life-giving, generative aspects rather than deficit-based perspectives (ibid.). Rooted in a number of fields—including action research, organizational development, and chaos theory, AI recognizes the power of language and imagery to shape consciousness (Watkins and Mohr 2001). It has been used in a range of settings—adult education (Lander 2002), city government (Johnson and Leavitt 2001), corporations (Zemke 1999), prisons (Elliott 1999), and faith communities (Salter 2000)—for a variety of purposes: community development (Belsie 2001), sustainable development (*Beyond Problem Analysis* 2000), extension education (Bowling and Brahm 2001), gender equity and diversity enhancement (Fry et al. 2002), workplace learning (Baskett 1993), and career development (Knowles 1999).

The principles underlying AI are *constructionism* (we create our own reality through patterns of communication and storytelling), *simultaneity* (learning and change happen simultaneously), *poetics* (human systems are stories open to interpretation), *anticipation* (what we anticipate is what we enact), and the *positive* (what should be rather than what is wrong) (Fry et al. 2002; Whitney 1998; Zemke 1999). An adaptation of AI, appreciative learning, has been used by adult educators and learners to identify positive learning experiences and create a positive learning environment (Preziosi and Gooden 2002; Yballe and O'Connor 2002); Lander's (2002) adult graduate students used it to develop teaching and learning research literacies. The inquiry, which might take place in a retreat, workshop, community meeting, "summit," or class, begins with the framing of what Cooperrider et al. (2000) call the "unconditional positive question" and proceeds through four processes (Elliott 1999; Fry et al. 2002; Watkins and Mohr 2001; Whitney 1998; Zemke 1999):

1. **Discover**—talking to one another, often via structured appreciative interviews, to identify exceptional/peak moments
2. **Dream**—envisioning what might be if the peak moments were the norm, not the exception; the images of the future that emerge are grounded in the "positive present"
3. **Design**—developing "provocative propositions" to achieve the vision and strategies to implement them
4. **Deliver**—acting on the provocative propositions, establishing new relationships, and mobilizing resources (known in some accounts as "Destiny")

Some critics are concerned that AI glosses over problems, asserting that change cannot happen unless they are solved (Reed et al. 2001; Zemke 1999). Some identify challenges in the process: complexity, group size, difficulty measuring results, and moving from vision to action (Baskett 1993; Johnson and Leavitt 2001; Reed et al. 2001). Others consider its reliance upon responsiveness to positive images and affirmations as a weakness (Johnson and Leavitt 2001). Although egalitarian participation is essential, power issues may arise (Elliott 1999; Reed et al. 2001). In a "culture of cynicism" (Elliott 1999, p. 281), AI may seem like "happy talk" or "The Little Engine that Could." Advocates respond that both problems and solutions are social constructions; a positive, generative perspective is not denial but a shift in focus (Watkins and Mohr 2001). AI can be genuinely transformative in the right conditions, but it requires time, trust, and a "new mental metabolism" (ibid.).

Resources

- Baskett, H. K. M. *Workplace Factors Which Enhance Self-Directed Learning*. Montreal, Quebec: Group for Interdisciplinary Research on Autonomy and Training, 1993. (ED 359 354)
To explore organizational conditions that facilitate self-directed learning, a participatory research workshop used AI. Major enhancers were involving individuals, taking personal responsibility, valuing differences, communicating, taking risks, and innovating. However, some thought that AI rather than SDL was the focus of inquiry.
- Belsie, L. "Look for What's Right." *Christian Science Monitor* 93, no. 203 (September 13, 2001): 15.
Describes how Bliss Browne's implementation of Imagine Chicago <<http://www.imaginechicago.org>> was grounded in AI principles.
- Beyond Problem Analysis: Using Appreciative Inquiry to Design and Deliver Environmental, Gender Equity and Private Sector Development Projects*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2000. http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2001/ai_myrada_tr3.pdf
A project to advance sustainable development and facilitate sustainable livelihoods by providing governmental and nongovernmental organizations in India with a better method of designing and delivering programs used AI to identify and reinforce community strengths, achievements, and vision.
- Bowling, C. J., and Brahm, B. A. "Shaping Communities through Extension Programs." *Journal of Extension* 40, no. 3 (June 2002). <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/a2.html>
Extension educators can extend and accelerate the community-shaping process by using action research processes like AI, which helps a community design and work toward an ideal future. One adaptation, the Porch Cookie Project, helped a community create new knowledge and shape its culture.
- Cooperrider, D. L.; Sorensen, P. F.; Whitney, D.; and Yaeger, T. F. *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*. Champaign, IL: Stipes, 2000.
Sourcebook contains 18 chapters that discuss rethinking human organizations and new horizons in AI and report case stories and empirical studies.
- Dispenza, M. *Our Families, Our Children: The Lesbian and Gay Child Care Task Force Report on Quality Child Care*. Seattle, WA: Lesbian and Gay Child Care Task Force, 1999. (ED 437 174)
Adopting an AI methodology, a task force identified the best of what is currently happening in child care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered parents and their children, to envision what might be, and to develop provocative propositions for shaping the most positive future imaginable for child care that supports these families.
- Elliott, C. *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1999. <http://www.iisd.org/pdf/appreciativeinquiry.pdf>
Part 1 is an introduction to the psychological and social underpinnings of AI. Part 2 goes through the process of an AI. Part 3 presents case studies of appreciative inquiry at work in organizational and community settings.
- Figgis, J. et al. *What Convinces Enterprises to Value Training and Learning and What Does Not?* Leabrook, South Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2001. (ED 462 602) <http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/proj/nr9016.pdf>

Used AI in interviews and group discussions to understand the concept of cultures of training and learning in enterprises and to investigate what makes case studies and other information about exemplary enterprises interesting and convincing enough that other enterprises will follow their lead.

Ford, N., and Ashford, G. "Appreciative Inquiry." *eViews*, no. 1. Ottawa, Ontario: Participatory Development Forum, February 2000. <http://www.pdforum.org/eviews1.html>

Gives an overview of AI and presents a practical application of visioning with members of the Participatory Development Forum.

Fry, R.; Barrett, F.; Seiling, J.; Whitney, D., eds. *Appreciative Inquiry and Organizational Transformation: Reports from the Field*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 2002.

Examines how AI works in practice and how its benefits can be realized in most organizations. Detailed case reports show how the approach is actually applied as well as its consequences.

Hall, J., and Hammond, S. "What Is Appreciative Inquiry?" *Inner Edge Newsletter*, 1998. Thin Book Publishing Co. <http://lib1.store.vip.sc5.yahoo.com/lib/thinbook/whatisai.pdf>

Covers the basics of AI and presents a case study of its use in a community change process involving youth in the South Bronx.

Hammonds, K. H. "Leaders for the Long Haul." *Fast Company* no. 48 (July 2001): 56. <http://www.fastcompany.com/online/48/roadway.html>

Workers and executives from Roadway Express came together to strategize about the company's future at an AI summit. They discovered that all levels wanted the same things for the company.

Johnson, G., and Leavitt, W. "Building on Success: Transforming Organizations through an Appreciative Inquiry." *Public Personnel Management* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 129-136.

Discusses how the application of AI to local government in Hampton, Virginia, revitalized the city's work force.

Knowles, S. "Designing Your Future." *Connections* (Queensland Guidance and Counselling Association) 16, no. 2 (June 1999): 21-29. <http://www.mbc.qld.edu.au/careers/designin.html>

Explains how to manage a career and live a desired lifestyle by applying AI to the process of career development.

Lander, D. A. "Teaching and Learning Research Literacies in Graduate Adult Education: Appreciative Inquiry into Practitioners' Ways of Writing." *Canadian Journal of University Continuing Education* 28, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 31-55.

Presents a theoretical framework for teaching and learning research literacies. Describes a classroom demonstration involving graduate student cohorts in appreciative inquiry into practitioners' ways of writing. Addresses the issues of human subjects, informed consent, and the ethics of representation.

Miller, M. G.; Fitzgerald, S. P.; Preston, J. C.; and Murrell, K. L. "The Efficacy of Appreciative Inquiry in Building Relational Capital in a Transcultural Strategic Alliance." *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2002, pp. E1-E6.

A comparative case study contrasted the impact of AI with that of a management education intervention on the development of relational capital in a U.S.-India biotechnology alliance. Overall, AI was found to support building relational capital in this transcultural strategic alliance.

Preziosi, R. C., and Gooden, D. J. "Using Appreciative Learning in Executive Education." *New Horizons in Adult Education* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2002). <http://www.nova.edu/~aed/horizons/volume16n1.html>

A leadership development program for managers used appreciative learning, based upon appreciative inquiry. Participants identified prior successful learning experiences for use in future work performance, creating a multiplier effect of positive experiences.

Reed, J.; Pearson, P.; Douglas, B.; Swinburne, S.; and Wilding, H. "Going Home from Hospital—An Appreciative Inquiry Study." *Health & Social Care in the Community* 10, no. 1 (January 2002): 36-45.

Involved a number of health care agencies and groups, including older people, working together to examine and develop practice in an area of shared concern using the AI process.

Salter, C. "We're Trying to Change World History." *Fast Company* no. 40 (November 2000): 230. http://www.fastcompany.com/online/40/wf_swing.html

AI was among the processes used to develop the United Religions Initiative, an interfaith network inspired by the United Nations.

Watkins, J. M., and Mohr, B. J. *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001. Following a brief history of AI, this book discusses the steps of the process with illustrative case studies for each. The issue of evaluation is addressed, and an appendix answers frequently asked questions about AI.

Whitney, D. "Let's Change the Subject and Change Our Organization: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Organization Change." *Career Development International* 3, no. 7 (1998): 314-319.

Describes the social constructionist view of organizational change. Explains AI principles and the 4-D model for positive change, with case examples.

Yballe, L., and O'Connor, D. "Appreciative Pedagogy: Constructing Positive Models for Learning." *Journal of Management Education* 24, no. 4 (August 2000): 474-483.

Appreciative inquiry, an approach focused on generation of a vision for an organization, may be adapted for management classes. Students and teachers conduct collaborative inquiry into successful experiences, creating positive images that generate positive action in the classroom.

Zemke, R. "Don't Fix That Company!" *Training* 36, no. 6 (June 1999): 26-33.

Details the use of AI as part of GTE's corporate culture change effort, which won an award for outstanding organizational development practices from the American Society for Training and Development.

Websites

AI eResource Center: <http://www.aradford.co.uk/pagefiles/newsletter.htm>. Links to AI resources; current and back issues of the AI E-Newsletter, available by subscription.

Appreciative Inquiry and Community Development: <http://iisd.ca/ai/default.htm>. Section of the International Institute for Sustainable Development's website describes AI projects among nongovernmental organizations in Southern India and First Nations communities in Northern Canada.

Appreciative Inquiry Commons: <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwrw.edu/>. Comprehensive worldwide portal at Case Western Reserve University devoted to the sharing of academic resources and practical tools on Appreciative Inquiry; includes research, case studies, listserv, network, resources and websites, events and training, AI tools.

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Center on Education and Training
for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090



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