

## PRACTICING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN UNDERGRADUATE ECONOMICS EDUCATION

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### ABSTRACT

Appreciative Inquiry (Ai)\* is a strengths-based approach to organizational development that has been used in place of the traditional deficit-based approach and has been very successfully applied to improve organizational outcomes. In this research study, Ai is applied to a diverse group of students in undergraduate non-specialist Economics classrooms to verify its effectiveness in the teaching-learning process. The objective of this paper to examine the pedagogical use of Ai in teaching and validate its utility in economics courses. Moreover, the specific objective is to find out challenges and opportunities when using Ai in classrooms. The approach is applied to five sections of Economics classes at Yorkville University, British Columbia Campus, Canada. Students, in each section were divided into small groups-the four phases of the Ai Cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny) were then applied to each student group. Each group discovered their strengths, shared their dreams for an ideal class, designed a collective vision/plan as to how to achieve their objectives and started implementing the plan. It was found that Ai increased students' engagement, confidence, attendance, commitment, and improved the overall academic environment in the class and enhanced student success. We conclude therefore that universities and academic institutions can utilize this rapidly evolving and popular tool of organizational development to positively impact educational outcomes in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry, Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny and Higher Education

\*In scientific literature and in this article, "Appreciative Inquiry" is shortened to "Ai", so that a clear distinction between Ai and AI Artificial Intelligence)

### 1. Introduction

It has been a long-standing tradition to align academic curricula with specific learning outcomes in different fields of study. A plethora of pedagogical tools is generally employed by instructors to address so-called 'student learning deficits' and problem areas in their disciplines. At the end of a course, the students evaluate the course, teacher and resources using a structured questionnaire provided by the institution. Many survey instruments of this type employ a Likert Scale-based approach. Based on students' evaluations, the institution usually identifies specific problems or deficiencies in the course, teaching pedagogy and resources. Accordingly, the course is revised/modified, resources are altered, and teaching methods are changed / improved for future semesters. The focal point of conventional learning has always been to harness the expertise of a teacher to address knowledge gaps in their students. It is not that everything about this conventional approach is flawed, and it does seem to work in specific instances. However, we cannot construe this approach as the sole catalyst of organizational change in academia. For one thing, the deficit-based approach is hardly a dynamic tool that can tackle the highly volatile environment that today's educational institutions must grapple with. Students of today operate in a high-pressure globalized world where technology and the pressures of multitasking often render traditional learning techniques ineffective. There is strong evidence that the classical deficit-based approach to problem-solving has often failed to deliver productive results (Smith, 2020). Therefore, the traditional approach based on problem identification, has been replaced by Appreciative Inquiry (Bickerton, 2018). "The primary goal of this approach is to actively engage the members of an organization by identifying, affirming, and appreciating their skills, resources, and positive experiences" (Davis, 2020).

The Appreciative Inquiry approach, drawn from positive psychology (Smith, 2020), focuses on what organizations do well, then explores and identifies how those strengths and values can be further improved (Bickerton, 2018). Appreciative inquiry is an approach that emphasizes innate organizational strengths to find new directions for growth rather than focusing on weaknesses or issues to be resolved (Beattie, 2018). In

essence, this approach focuses on what is working rather than what is not working. (Knox, Carter, Sommers, and Michaels, 2015). The 4 D cycle to which we have referred earlier is the '*sine qua non*' of operationalizing an Ai process. It is a well-defined methodology that allows an organization to identify its positive core strengths/competencies relative to a pre-determined affirmative topic that is the focal point of an Ai intervention. In the case of education, current approaches to teaching-learning improvement and students' engagement are largely problem-based. Academic problems and deficiencies are typically identified at the end of a course as a result of a standard rating-scale based evaluation by the students as explained above. Therefore, we propose to offer an alternative Ai intervention to improve teaching-learning outcomes and maximize students' engagement. The Ai cycle comprising the four Ds (Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny), can be used by universities and colleges to maximize students' engagement by considering the core strengths of both students and their institutions. The approach is entirely strengths-based which provides an opportunity to the students to discover their strengths, think about an ideal class and learning techniques, design a plan for study and start implementation from the day first of class. It also provides an opportunity to the teachers to discover students' strengths and plan their teaching accordingly and move along with the plan without waiting for students' evaluation and problem identification at the end of semester. In particular, this systems-based approach will work more efficiently and effectively in case of universities that have large pools of international students. This is because teachers usually have very little '*a priori*' knowledge of the skills and academic propensities of such students.

At this point, a brief discussion about the theoretical underpinnings of Ai is in order. The 'Positive Core' of an organization is the first step toward comprehending Appreciative Inquiry. The positive core of an organization represents its best practices, the very best it has to offer. A serious attempt at undertaking change management cannot be separated from understanding the positive core. It must be emphasized that the 'positive core' of an organization is so deeply intertwined with the 4D cycle that it is virtually impossible to separate them. Most Ai practitioners view the 4D cycle as an operational tool, one that allows us to visualize the positive core distinctly and initiate a transformative mechanism. The future of any organization rests on the superstructure of its positive core and this is what renders Ai a holistic intervention, one that is neither top-down or bottom-up but utilizes a systems approach. The concept of the Affirmative Topic is crucial to developing an effective Ai initiative. This refers to the subject or issue that is the focal point of Ai intervention. In essence, it can be described as an organization's 'life-giving story'. Once the positive core is identified, an Ai intervention starts with the choice of the 'Affirmative Topic'-this is the focus of the organizational intervention. Academic literature in the field is unanimous in delineating the selection of the affirmative topic as a narrative exercise that describes an organization's so-called 'life-giving story'. The structural framework of Appreciative Inquiry rests on the following phases of the 4D cycle:

- **Discovery (What has been):** In this phase, the participants discover the strengths and capacity of the group, organization or community and factors that energize it. The participants determine the "best of what is" or what their current strengths are. Specifically, participants may be asked to describe what actually interests them and a storytelling approach is often followed. These stories identify and explain the strengths of the organization as well as the root causes of success. (Assudani and Kilbourne, 2015 and Knox, Carter, Sommers, and Michaels, 2015, Conklin, 2009). In this phase the focus is on identifying the most positive aspects of the experience (Roberts, 2013).
- **Dream (What could be):** This is the next step after an organization has discovered its positive core. In this phase the participants are encouraged to dream or create a vision of what could be. Participants are encouraged to dwell actively on what "could" be or what would work well in the future. The most unique feature about this phase of the Ai process is that 'dreams' about the future are based on concrete realities of an organization's past achievements. Such an empirically grounded approach makes this process very different from other organizational planning methodologies.
- **Design (What should be):** This phase is about transforming the dream into a plan. The participants are encouraged to focus on designing a vision on the basis of the 'Dream' phase. It is in this phase that the 'positive core' identified earlier begins to assume a distinct form. A very important component of this phase is 'co construction'. The participants consolidate plans and ways in which their ideal can be attained (Roberts, 2013)
- **Destiny (What will be):** In this phase, participants are empowered to bring about a transformation in the organization and sustain it. Concrete plans are put into practice (Roberts, 2013). In this phase, one sees the beginning of an 'Appreciative Inquiry' culture, one that is based on the knowledge acquired in the previous

phases. A continuous process of learning and adjustment in the organization is the hallmark of the ‘destiny’ phase.

The general objective of this paper to explore how does Ai works to engage students and improve the teaching-learning process. More specific objectives are to examine the use of Ai in teaching and find its utility in economics courses, to investigate how the Ai approach create an academic environment for students to focus on their attitudes toward studies, make them more responsible and committed, increase their interaction with teacher and fellow students and to find out challenges and opportunities when using Ai in classrooms. Similarly, to find out what are the students’ strengths, what kind of an ideal class they wish, how they designed their plan and started implementing it.

## 2. Literature Review

The traditional approach to organizational improvement is subsumed in a deficit- based approach that emphasis identification and addressing the causes of weak links in the system (Cooperrider, 2012). This approach has generally produced poor results (David, 1999). Ai is an alternative approach that focuses on identifying organizational strengths and leveraging them to create system-wide change (Knox, Carter, Sommers, and Michaels, 2015). Ai focuses on what is working, rather than what is not working, and leads people to construct their future (Smith, 2020). Ai encourages organizations to look for opportunities instead of problems when designing personal, organizational, and societal change initiatives (Bushe, 1995). Ai “works very well in changing human systems or in solving human systems problems (organizations or small and large groups including classrooms, relationships, departments, etc.)” (Macpherson, 2015). Ai was initially conceptualized by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastava as an alternate approach to traditional problem-based approach (Cooperrider and Srivastava,1987) when David was working as a doctoral student under Professor Suresh Srivastava at Case Western Reserve University, US (Macpherson, 2015).

Ai can be deployed in a classroom setting to achieve better learning environments. (Aviva Education, 2019). There are a few studies where Ai has been applied in actual classrooms and its efficacy has been empirically confirmed. Specifically, Ai interventions have led to enhancement of students’ engagement, commitment, motivation, self-confidence, and learning. (Grandy and Holton, 2010; MacLeod, 2013; Rose Helens-Hart, 2018, Davis, 2020). An Ai exercise in a Business Education program has been found to successful in engendering an autonomy supportive classroom. Post-survey results from 10 distinct Ai-based classroom experiences showed that it is possible to achieve considerable success in creating autonomy -supportive classrooms and enable to students to experience peak learning experiences (Conklin and Hartman, 2013, 294-302)

The current study has been designed to gauge its efficacy in non-specialist undergraduate economics courses.

## 3. Application of Appreciation Inquiry in Economics Courses

### 3.1. Background of the Participants

The Ai approach was applied to enhance student learning in five sections (120 students) of two economics courses at Yorkville University, British Columbia Campus, Canada. The exercise was initiated in the winter term of 2019. In general, most students are from Asian countries and only a few have studied economics at their secondary schools. The students are generally not familiar with the social, cultural and education system of Canada. Adjustment issues are common as their cultural backgrounds are significantly different. We have limited knowledge about the students’ language skills and their prior knowledge and ability in the course. Therefore, applying Ai is very useful for the course teacher to plan lectures and other leaning activities as per students’ strengths.

### 3.2. Methodology

Ai was applied in the economics courses in the Winter term of 2019 and used as a treatment group. The previous term of Fall 2018 was used as the control group as Ai was not applied at that time. Although there was no formal data collection and statistical analysis, we generally compared learning outcomes such as students’ participation, engagement, grades, confidence, and satisfaction with those of the control group.

### 3.3. Applying Appreciation Inquiry in Classroom

On first day of the class, participants were asked to form a group of 3-4 students. They were given 15 minutes to share and discuss “how the classroom can be better” considering their past learning experiences, and strengths in economics or general studies. After their discussion and sharing, the 4D phase was applied to each group as follows:

- **Discovery:** In this phase, each group was asked to identify their strengths. A few questions were asked to collect/understand their positive work which will help them in current class. For example, what is your favorite course? Explain why you like the course and how was your performance/score. Who was your favorite teacher/ why you like him/her? What are his/her characteristics? Explain any best learning experience you have enjoyed and achieved your goals. Indicate your prior knowledge in economics? Explain how you study and allocate your time optimally Do you prefer verbal instruction / explanations or visual learning?

This phase was very creative and productive because each student shared past stories and focused on positive things that they achieved and enjoyed in life. In this phase, each group created a list of students' strengths. This list of discovery provided a set of guidelines for students and teachers, charting a way forward by considering students' strengths. This was an important phase for the teacher to understand students' strength in the course, the level of students' prior knowledge in economics, kind of teaching methodology and the specific attributes of a teacher that students generally liked. For example, most students expressed the opinion that their favorite teacher was very friendly and supportive. Similarly, each group stated that the teaching methodology should combine both visual learning techniques and explanations with examples from real world.

- **Dream:** After discovering the students' strengths, the groups were asked to dream of an ideal class. This phase was really an exciting one for students to think about how an ideal classroom would look like. How an ideal class will be where students will be not boring, and they enjoy learning and fully understand the topics/concepts. Students shared some of the dreams for an ideal class include grades, assignments, learning activities, assessment criteria, class discussion, group learning, extra classes, active learning, mutual respect, teacher attitude and class environment / resources etc. One of the challenges in this phase was that most of the students wished for high grades and less numbers of assignments. It was clarified that grades are granted based on students' performance and quality of works produced. The number of assignments and other class activities would be followed as per the syllabus approved by the university. However, due dates for assignments will be relaxed during the semester and rubrics will be provided for each assignment.
- **Design:** Using data from the discovery and dream phase, each group designed a collective vision/ plan for an ideal class to achieve their goals. Later, the plans of each group were merged, and a collective vision was developed for an ideal class. The plan was based on students' strengths and what they dreamt in respect of an ideal class. The plan developed by all groups collectively is analogous to a check list for students' success. Moreover, it represented a commitment toward their studies.
- **Destiny:** The final stage of appreciative inquiry is students' commitment to the aspirations that they agreed on. Each participant started implementation of their collective visionary plan in this phase. Throughout the term, they followed the plan because it was like an agreement with themselves and the course instructor. Any attempt at deviating from the plan was negated by reminders about the agreement that had been struck by the two parties.

#### 4. Discussion

Appreciative Inquiry is drawn from positive psychology and has been used globally by public and private organizations of all sizes. The approach is applied in the area such as sales growth, customer service, sustainable value creation, leadership development, redesigning organization structure and to improve cost, quality, and cycle time in organizations. Few cases available where Ai is applied to teaching and produced goods results. It strengthens the bond between the students, engage students in self-determine change, create a sense of shared vision and direction. The Ai work very well and is effective when we applied to the diverse group of students whose basic skills and level of knowledge in the relevant area are unknown. This provides an opportunity to the instructor to know about the students' background and strength and use an appropriate teaching method which work for such students. Teaching to a diverse group of students without knowing their strengths is not effective. One of the challenges in the discovery phase was that students hesitate and shy to explain their strengths and weakness in front of the whole class. Therefore, we divide class into small groups and asked each group to discuss and answer the questions which were displayed on multimedia. The dream phase was the most challenges because each group mostly looking for a short cut to have limited and effortless assignments and dream for high grades. The students were clarified that the course syllabus is designed based on market need and each assignment is connected with learning out comes. Our results are like other studies conducted in teaching.

## 5. Results and Conclusion

Overall, the Ai approach worked very well from the perspectives of both students and teachers. Teachers generally understand the basic academic touchpoints that allow students to perform better. Therefore, an opportunity was given to students to fulfil their dreams for an ideal class. For example, many students wished to work in small groups, and this was implemented throughout the semester with demonstrated results. All students showed renewed commitment and enthusiasm in class activities. The Ai approach increased students' participation, teamwork, interest, attendance, curiosity, a more proactive approach, and timely submission of assignments. The approach developed a symbiotic academic relationship between students and teachers that immensely enhanced communication, understanding and trust. The approach clearly illustrated the mechanism of the transformative shift of a teacher's mindset from the common deficit-based approach to students' strength-based approach. It must be mentioned that fundamental challenges in the dream and destiny phases were faced by the teachers. In the dream phase, some students wished to reduce the numbers of class assignments. However, it was explained that the course syllabus, marking criteria and number of assignments etc. is centralized as per university policy which cannot be changed. However, flexibility in submissions of assignments can be granted in case of any genuine problem.

The study was limited to five groups of economics classes. It would be useful to apply Ai in other disciplines as well and thereby broaden the compass of our investigation. Both efficiency and effectiveness of courses taught in a traditional manner can then be meaningfully compared with those utilizing the Ai approach.

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