

(E)VALUING A LEARNER-CENTERED CLASS IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITH AN APPRECIATIVE EYE: A CASE STUDY

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(E)Valuing a learner-centered class in higher education with an appreciative eye is presented as an alternative to evaluating teaching with a deficit-based approach. The present globalised knowledge society is witnessing a paradigm shift from teaching content to competency; the emphasis is on continuous learning, and learning how to learn. As a response to above needs this paper calls for a learner-centered perspective in education and proposes (e) valuing what is good in the class, the best practice and peak moments rather than evaluating it. Hence the letter “e” of (e) valuing is under parenthesis. This paper through a case study proposes Appreciative Inquiry, an asset-based approach to valuing pedagogy as instrumental in bringing a positive change in the class. This approach empowered the students and teachers in transformational ways to positively affect the teaching-learning environment, enhanced collective learning, and being participatory in nature it improved interpersonal relationships, encouraged mutual trust and respect leading to an energised synergy. This article reflects through this case study, and stands to benefit educators, teachers and students from the insights generated from this work.

INTRODUCTION

Change is a fundamental feature of modern life and it is necessary to develop social systems that can learn and adapt. In the postindustrial period there was no place for routine, monotonous work, and specialisation of labor and this in turn brought an end to the content era. Rapid advancement of science and technology during the two World Wars, advancement of theories like systems and contingency theories and finally liberalisation and opening up of markets in the late 1980s, brought education theorists, researchers as well as practitioners out of the silos mindset. The uncertain, dynamic environment of the 1990s led to intense competition. The newly emerging service sector along with the manufacturing industries needed flexible knowledge workers willing to learn, and unlearn all the time. Hence, teaching is not just contents and facts, but skills and competency became the need of the hour just to survive and compete in the complex environment. Even in ancient Athens “education was not a segregated activity, conducted for certain hours, in certain places, at a certain time of life. It was the aim of the society. The city educated the man; the Athenian was educated by culture, by paideia” (Hutchins 1970, p.133). A learning society has thus become inevitable.

Under these circumstances, the traditional transmission teaching where teacher as knowledge-giver churns out facts usually through lectures and textbooks, keeps the classroom in order; and students listen to the teacher with utmost attention, take examinations regurgitating out the facts generally in written or oral form will be unable to respond to the needs of the present society. The twenty first century presents a knowledge society where knowledge is neither static nor absolute; this calls for a learner-centered perspective in education. Research (Jonnaert 2002, p.76-77) indicates that education is no longer a matter of teaching decontextualised subject-matter content, it is rather identifying situations in which learners can construct, transform or repudiate the knowledge and competencies associated with this content. Hence content is no longer seen as an end-in-itself, but a means to handle everyday’s situations. As a response to the above needs (e) valuing a learner-centered class in higher education with an appreciative eye is presented as an alternative to evaluating teaching with a deficit-based approach. For this purpose this paper first examines the theoretical foundation of Appreciative Inquiry as a strength based approach, secondly it discusses the importance of an Appreciative Inquiry approach to education and a learner-centered class in the present globalised world, finally, this paper through a case study proposes that Appreciative Inquiry, an asset-based approach to valuing pedagogy is instrumental in bringing a positive change since it leverages “what brings life to the class when it is at its best” and amplifies it to evolve an imagery of the future. Evaluation is a judgment about good and bad, which is an end in itself and it does not offer any opportunity for generating alternatives and possibilities. On the other hand valuing is

discovering what is good, and leveraging it to bring about positive generative change. Hence “e” of (e) valuing is under parenthesis.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) “ refers to both a search for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action which are designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a group, organization, or society as a whole” (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987, p. 159). The seminal article “Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life” (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) paved the way for practitioners to adopt this approach, adapt it to the context and share new practices. In the last two decades there has been a growing sense of disenchantment with exhausted theories of change, especially those dealing with vocabularies of human deficit, and at the same time there is an urge to work with people in more constructive, positive ways (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005).

Appreciative Inquiry is about discovering the best and focuses on what you want more of. It comes from cultivating an “appreciative mindset” (Bushe & Pitman 1991). Appreciative Inquiry begins at the system-wide level with asking questions, which is mobilisation of inquiry through the crafting of the “unconditional positive question”. When people in a social system start talking, sharing stories of their past and present capacities, i.e., achievements, unexplored potentials, core values, innovations, strength, best practices, high point moments, competencies, they are in fact discovering the positive core. This positive core is like an atom, a battery so charged that if the energy of this core is linked to any change agenda, then changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilised. Today educators must recognise this positive core as a resource, and an asset to bring about a positive generative change. Besides searching for the best, Appreciative Inquiry approach makes the positive core the common and explicit property of all and leverages it to consciously co-construct a better future. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, design and destiny. Appreciative Inquiry 4-D model passes through Discovery - mobilising a system-wide inquiry into the positive change core; Dream- co-creating a realistic vision based on the foundation stone of discovered potential; Design- giving shape to the dream through provocative propositions of the ideal organisation which is capable of amplifying or fanning (Bushe 2007) the positive core and realising the dream articulated in the previous stage; and Destiny- implementing the design, strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system, enabling it to build hope and momentum and creating processes for learning, adjustment, and improvisation, like a jazz group over time (Barrett 1998).

At the core of the cycle lies the affirmative positive topic. This is because human systems grow in the direction of what they persistently ask questions about and this propensity is strongest and most sustainable when the means and ends of inquiry are positively correlated (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005.) The seeds of change are implicit in the first questions asked, because they set the stage for what we “find”; and what we “discover” (the qualitative data) creates the material out of which the future is conceived, conversed about, and constructed. Inquiry and change are thus simultaneous moments. In contrast, the traditional problem-solving approach focuses on what is wrong, leading to feelings of despair, excuses, denials, justifications, and feelings of defensiveness. Appreciative Inquiry, instead, shifts the focus to the strengths, successes in the past and the present and this leads to feelings of accomplishment, feelings of worth and being valued which is energising. Change practitioners are beginning to work with the positive presumption that organisations are certainly composed of human beings, with infinite imagination and creativity and not “items” to be studied, observed, and predicted. They need lot of positive affect and bonding to bring about any long-term change in the system.

Importance of Appreciative Inquiry approach to education and learned-centered class in the present globalised world

In the present postindustrial globalised world, problem solving as a mode of inquiry seems to have failed to inspire, mobilise and sustain significant human system change. We have not only not been able to solve the problem but in the process created new problems of ruthless and meaningless competition among students, and an environment of jealousy, hatred, and blame throwing. Enormous amount of resources have gone into solving these problems in institutions of education. It is now time to look into more generative, strength-based model to work with social systems. This paper proposes the Appreciative Inquiry approach. This approach was initially used in Organisation Development (Bushe 1995; Bushe 2001; Mohr, Smith & Watkins 2000; Singh 2009) however, this strength-based approach is today becoming an effective practice in all spheres of social systems- including community development (Ashford & Patkar 2001), education (Yballe & O'Connor 2000; Dole & Morris 2004). Educators are beginning to realise the potential of Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for transformative change among teachers, staff, students, teacher educators and the educational institute as a system (Willoughby & Tosey 2007).

Besides, Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to change and as a theory of organising has a pivotal role in today's knowledge society which needs more and more educated people, and they in turn have a need for life long learning to keep up with the changing need of skills and knowledge at their workplace. In the present competitive globalised environment, the focus on the positive will not only help educational organisations survive but have a competitive advantage over others. The infrastructure is only so important, what lies within, role the teachers play; their attitude towards the students gives an edge to an educational institution. In the post bureaucratic era, knowledge has meaning only if it is constantly updated. Transmission teaching or "telling" made sense in an unchanging environment. While in today's changing world, research (Rogers 1985, p.104) affirms that changingness and reliance on process rather than on static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education. The process brings deuterolearning i.e., learning how to learn, into focus and this can be made possible only when teachers instill a love for learning among their students. This paper points out that what is critical to success is to teach the process and social skills, as these will help individuals anticipate and cope with not just the ever changing and demanding workplace but the challenges of work-life balance as well. In these circumstances the teacher-facilitator must create conditions and actively help students develop these competencies; in education this is possible only when the focus changes from teacher to student. In teacher-focused learning environment students are mere consumers of information, as they sit quietly and listen to their teachers, while they mostly by themselves work on what the teacher has provided. However, in student-focused learning environment, students are the producers of ideas as teachers actively and consciously encourage and facilitate students to engage in collaborative learning activities that requires multiple levels of thinking. Hence, in today's knowledge society, there is a need for teachers to move from a didactic approach of authority, distance, judgmental, impersonal, one-dimensional role and deficit-based problem solving approach to student-centered, humanistic, and strength-based Appreciative Inquiry approach to instill love for lifelong learning. Roger's humanistic psychology as well as Appreciative Inquiry approach emphasise that the focus of research determines the outcome (Bushe & Kassam 2005). Most importantly, humanistic psychology helps to understand the concept of a "fully functioning" (term used by Rogers) person by focusing on the human potential. One of the fundamental principles of social constructivism which forms the basis of Rogers' learner-centered classroom as well as Appreciative Inquiry approach is that we construct our own meaning and meaning requires understanding the parts as well as the whole. This is somewhat overlooked by teachers in the traditional class. Hence, system thinking (Senge 1990) becomes an imperative where students are given the big picture so that they see how the smaller parts are interrelated, and interconnected, like a jigsaw puzzle thus making the whole. This certainly shows to the students the relevance of what they are doing and why they are doing thus, making learning interesting. This paper, by exploring the commonality between the humanistic and the Appreciative Inquiry approach concludes that the two complement each other, more so, in the discipline of education. Appreciative Inquiry is a means to realise Rogers' therapeutic method reflected in his view

of human nature- ability, an inner capacity to actualise the self, if freed, they can do it by themselves. Rogers asserted that students have interest and enthusiasm, and the task of the teacher is to free them so that self-initiated learning occurs.

Since knowledge is a human construction, in the present globalised world, the teachers must play a conscious role in the construction of knowledge. Human beings construct knowledge in two mental phases, first they construct mental models of their environment and then they interpret and understand new experience in relation to the existing mental model (Taylor & Coll 2002, p. 295). The teacher needs to shift from the traditional paradigm of teaching only contents to teaching students to question their existing mental models which in turn, impacts the actions students take. Hence, today, the teachers' role is much more enlarged and complex wherein they must mould the present younger generation of students into future generation of socially responsible, and culturally sensitive world citizens. For this, it is important that teachers understand how learning takes place. While social learning theory states that one learns from observing other people, other researchers (Lave & Wenger 1991) propose a more radical model of situated learning where learning is placed in social relationships. Dewey, Lewin, and Kolb too made students' learning the centre of focus where they are constantly learning through doing. Extending the theory of learning, it is argued (Argyris & Schön 1974) that practitioners need to go beyond single-loop which focuses on improving the status quo producing only incremental change in the social system and move towards double-loop learning or generative learning as it brings about transformational change. Appreciative Inquiry approach goes a step further in generating possibilities and alternatives with the help of inquiry bringing a generative transformational change.

Besides learning, reflection was also brought into the centre of learning. According to Schön (1987) students are 'reflective practicum' as they become proficient in a kind of reflection-in-action and also when it works well there is a reflection-on-action. It is important, however, to distinguish this from Rogers' reflection, which is, mirroring of emotional communication, as an important technique which teachers need to use in their interpersonal communication with students, so that they feel being listened to and cared enough to be understood. This paper however, argues that the two concepts of "reflection" though seemingly different complement each other and emphasises that a teacher in a learner-centered class must demonstrate both these "reflection".

CASE STUDY

Being an educator, learner and practitioner, the teacher was keen on applying the Appreciative approach in the class. This case study presents the discovery phase of Appreciative Inquiry approach used to uncover the strengths, hopes, successes and best practices and thus (e) value a learner-centered class in higher education. The purpose of the study was to use the material, stories, and the "data" tracked during the discovery phase of the first semester to dream an imagery for the future, then design the structure and the processes and finally implement it in the next three semesters, creating a more effective learner-centered class with a conscious focus on the positive. The study took place in a mixed business management school, which has two sections of total 133 students, who are in their first semester of a two year Master in Business Administration (MBA) programme. The diversity of the students in not so much in terms of age group, most of them being 21-24 years old, but more in terms of language, region they come from, family background, and the norms and culture of their previous educational institutions.

This case study describes a learner-centered class as one which incorporates the principles of Rogerian humanistic education. Research (Rogers 1969) in the last century and even today shows that students prefer to be engaged in collaborative learning activities that involve lower to higher order thinking, interacting with not just teachers but also peers and carrying out their enquiries to construct their own meanings. In such an environment, teachers become facilitators of learning, thus, giving to the students "freedom to learn", creating an emotionally safe environment and structuring challenging activities for the

students. Rogers' humanistic education thus, had an important implication for the teacher - that pedagogy can be enacted through human relationships; teaching only content is not important. Such a class had empowered the students to be responsible, accountable for their own learning, and the confidence it gave armed them with "I can do it" attitude. The class thus became a place for learning through lot of activities, fun and humor. The environment was not of fear and inhibitions, thus the appreciative feedback form was considered appropriate to assess the pedagogy. The feedback form administered to the students had the following three questions:

1. Recall a peak moment, a time when you enjoyed the most being in this class. What made it a peak moment? Was it something about the situation, your classmates, the teacher, or the group that made it a peak moment?
2. What do you value most in yourself / your classmates / your teacher or in the institute?
3. If you were to come back after five years as an alumni or a Faculty member, how would you like your learner-centered class to look like?

Social systems grow in the direction of what we study. Hence, the questions in the students' feedback form were crafted with a positive focus, and were designed to look for and strengthen the positive potential in students and teachers. Besides, the appreciative questions naturally lend themselves to a narrative, helping the respondents to open up and write their story of moments of strengths, and success in the class. The traditional feedback form however, mostly has statements (which are rated on a scale of 1 to 5) and one or two open-ended questions where the students often write what went wrong, and the problems they faced but it does not offer possibilities and alternatives. Such a deficit-based feedback form evaluates the pedagogy and there is an implicit assumption of "I-you", distancing students from the teachers rather than bringing them together as co-creators of an effective class. Again, as inquiry and change are simultaneous moments, the "unconditional positive questions" in the feedback form were crafted in a way that they are not judging or evaluating anything, au contraire; they were valuing what is good and the best. These questions with a positive focus helped students delve deep, reflect on the past and the present and discover the strengths, values and happiness. The students' responses were then shared in the class to increase the circles of positive dialogue because listening to and telling each other uplifting stories about the best of their meaningful experiences leads people to uncover their similarities, soothes those tensions and an amazing energy can appear (Bushe 2007).

This case study is presented with a view that (e) valuing a class with an Appreciative Inquiry approach has the potential of bringing about a positive change. The students' responses when analysed revealed the following:

- a. Appreciative Inquiry process provided students and teacher an opportunity to value themselves, their classmates and their teacher.
- b. It helped students to narrate peak experiences and to understand the factors that create the best.
- c. The process generated a synergy that is somehow missing when teachers and students relate to each other in a more traditional manner.
- c. The Appreciative Inquiry discovery phase enabled students to experience the importance of recalling and sharing peak experience stories.
- d. It gave them an opportunity to "track" when they want more in order to "fan" (Bushe 2007)) and build the imagery of the future on what works best in the present.

The case study now presents the analysis of students' responses to the appreciative questions in the feedback form. For question 1, some students described the moments that were enjoyable; while others wrote the factors that made it a peak experience. For the purpose of analysis the responses have been categorised into- activities, teaching and classmates.

Activities

*Laying down ground rules for an effective teaching-learning process Humor, makes the class more enjoyable.

*Case study sessions are very interactive; many more students could contribute towards it. Most case studies were indeed insightful, and gave us an opportunity to explore different perspectives.

*The feedback that I got from my classmates and the teacher after my first presentation was unforgettable. It helped me get rid of my stage fear.

*Role play instead of PPT by the students on Type A and B personalities is memorable.

*The teacher changed our places making boys and girls sit in alternate rows (the teacher did this after a feedback from a student that few girls sitting in one corner of the class feel neglected and the school encourages segregation of boys and girls). That day, I could make eye contact with the teacher and it made me feel part of the class

Teaching

*Teaching style was enjoyable. Open discussions in the class leads to new thoughts and ideas. I learnt to listen to differing opinions expressed by my classmates. Teacher encourages us to involve ourselves in the learning process. Learning-by-doing method used by the teacher. The day, teacher divided the class into groups to discuss individual versus group decision-making. Teacher said “thanks” when I answered, that day I felt very good. Though English is the language of instruction, the teacher sometimes speaks in our languages; we are able to relate more easily to the teacher.

*Active, high energy level of the teacher. We feel energised too.

* Class on “HR Policies and Procedures” was enjoyable as the teacher led us through an organisation with examples making us feel like HR Managers. This enabled us to understand the lesson very well.

*Teacher does not put us down instead asks “Do you have anything else to add?”, “What is your perspective?” Teacher encourages more and more students to participate by asking for new hands to be raised and not “the usual suspects”. Cheerful nature, smiling face makes the teacher approachable. I can ask anything without the fear of being ridiculed. When the teacher relates experience and shares with us, I feel that they too are just like us with emotions and feelings.

*Comments and compliments written on the mid-term answer scripts.

Classmates

*Helpful nature of many of my classmates.

*Working in a small team for the project and conducting survey in an organisation was a good learning experience.

*A few students have started talking, gesticulating like the teacher, this is funny.

*My friends tell me that the confidence gained in the class has improved my communication skills.

These moments of peak experience and factors that made them enjoyable demonstrate that teaching is like therapy, where students need to be given autonomy and freedom with responsibility, if teachers want them to become independent, fully functioning human beings in the society. Rogerian non-directive, client-centered therapy explained this by using the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle. “When you help a child to learn to ride a bike, you can’t just tell them how. They have to try it for themselves. You can’t hold them up the whole time either. There comes a point when you have to let them go. If they fall, they fall, but if you hang on, they never learn” (Rogers 1951). In this case study, Appreciative feedback reiterates the humanistic approach which considers students as humans with emotions, dignity, self-esteem and not as passive receivers of knowledge; and teacher as a person with feelings, emotions, and not just a giver of knowledge, or a machine. It is by being genuine, and showing students’ acceptance that teacher was beginning to bring transformational changes in the class and this was possible because the common practice of teacher maintaining a certain “emotional distance” from their students which in turn creates a psychological barrier between them, was not experienced by the students.

The students' responses to question 2 are categorised into- what I value about myself, my classmates and my teachers.

What I Value most about

Myself:

Alertness, attentiveness, dependability, sincerity, presentation skills, ability to interact with Faculty members, self-respect, ability to adapt to new places, sixth sense, imagination, persistence.

Classmates:

Good team to work with, cooperation, helpfulness, discipline, honest feedback (this was very motivating), friendly and kindness.

Teachers:

Stimulating conversation with our course coordinator; cooperative teacher; commitment and hard work; encouragement by the teacher to speak increased confidence; teaching style; not as strict as others; passion for teaching; inspiring; effort to create a good learning environment; dedication; motivation; not ignoring anyone in the class; smiling; positive approach towards students; parent-like making us feel at home and comfortable in this place.

It was important to discover what students valued most because this will form the foundation stone in constructing the ideal image of a future effective learner-centered class.

The following responses for question 3 are indeed generative in nature since they offer possibilities and alternatives to bring a positive transformational change in the class.

More presentations by the students.

More case studies in the class.

Slide presentations for some lessons may be useful (to break the monotony of slide presentations with the lights dimmed, the teacher decided to use chalk-board-talk-lively discussions, thus participation by all in all-lights-on classroom). Showing more video clips related to the subject matter.

Anecdotes- story telling from real life cases. More frequent assessment.

Girls and boys sitting together in the class. Students' visit to organisations (these visits are normally scheduled in the second year).

More role plays.

Wi-Fi class rooms.

No uniforms for students. More technology based teaching.

In contrast to the problem-solving approach which focuses on the deficit, the gaps, what is not working and what is making the teaching-learning an ineffective process, the Appreciative Inquiry was chosen as an approach because teacher could ask students to tell stories of peak experience, and to imagine how an ideal learner-centered class would look like rather than just list problems. An appreciative feedback, thus, helped students to see the learner-centered class through an appreciative filter: as glass half-full rather than glass half-empty. This was also possible because the co-creators (teacher and students) of this class, decided to know their social system as one with infinite imagination, unlimited capabilities, and as a centre of human relatedness.

The "data" from this appreciative feedback are not in numbers; they are narratives, quotes, and stories-all written in first person, and in the language of the students. The most powerful vehicle communities have for transforming their conventions is through the act of dialogue made possible by language (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987). According to the constructivist principle, teachers and students co-construct their own realities through language, through words. The social system can be constructed and reconstructed. In this case study, the discovery of what worked best in the present and the past thus became the first step towards constructing a positive change in this learner-centered class. An important question that may arise is, if teachers by focusing on the positive are either ignoring problems or avoiding them. This class

was just approaching it from the other side, that is, the positive core. Heliotropic hypothesis states that just like certain plants grow in the direction of sunlight (*Helios*, the Sun in Greek), social forms too evolve towards “light”; that is, towards images that are affirmative and life giving. Socio-rationalists argue that positive future images create a pull effect that generates evolution in social forms. Not only do we see what we believe, but the very act of believing it creates it (Bushe 1995). In this case study teachers and students together as agents of change were thus, consciously evolving a positive imagery of a more effective learner-centered class. Recent research shows that more and more educators and practitioners are beginning to apply Appreciative Inquiry approach to suit the classroom environment be it to achieve enhanced learning outcomes (Ojha, Paudel, Pudasaini, Lamichhane & Shrestha 2003), or as a process (Conklin 2009) in organisational creation and change. The latter outlines steps for an in-class exercise titled “The Preferred Classroom,” to be used to design and organise a college classroom for the term. Results of the exercise show increased awareness and optimism in students about their lives as well as relationship development with others in the class through shared experiences. Similarly research (Neville 2008) on education during postindustrial globalisation which renders business and society interdependent emphasises that innovative pedagogy assumes that educators hold responsibility for creating and fostering new skills in business students. Critical thinking, self-awareness, and values analysis skills support students seeking to engage with and innovate based on perspectives different from their own. These results reiterate the outcomes of (e) valuing the learner-centered class in higher education with an appreciative eye.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that Appreciative Inquiry approach to (e) valuing a learner-centered class in higher education was effective in building closer and better interpersonal relationship among students and at the same time with the teacher. This synergy was palpable. Besides, the focus on the positive not only energised the students and the teacher but also empowered them in transformational ways to positively affect the teaching-learning environment. This will enhance the generativity as Appreciative Inquiry approach is an iterative process- making the lessons and outcomes of one Appreciative Inquiry, the focus of inquiry for the next Appreciative Inquiry (Bushe 2007). Being highly participatory in nature, this asset-based approach to (e) valuing the learner-centered class enhanced collective and active involvement in learning, and encouraged mutual trust and respect. This study emphasises that participants need lot of positive affect and bonding for any long-term change to be brought about. It has also led the researcher to believe that the teachers must be an expert in the subject, or the content as it definitely gives them the confidence to be genuine and not to put up a façade in the class. The expertise in the subject matter, however, does not seem to be a sufficient condition to be an effective teacher. The latter must also demonstrate, what Rogers believed, the attitudinal qualities of genuineness, unconditional positive regard and empathy towards the students. These learning from the case study though, not revolutionary, they do reaffirm our deeply held beliefs. In this new educational paradigm, the findings from this study have the potential to contribute to the areas of study that focus on effective teaching and learning. This paper also suggests that further research examining the effectiveness of Appreciative Inquiry approach in assessing traditional teacher-centered classes in particular needs to be carried out. This article reflects through this case study, and stands to benefit educators, teachers and students from the insights generated from this work. What comes out of this narrative is that there is no set way to apply Appreciative Inquiry as an Organisation Development intervention in the classic sense. Appreciative Inquiry is a way of being as well as seeing the world around us.

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