A view from an Appreciating practice

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Finding the key from experience

I've been using elements of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for a very long time, well before I knew the overarching terminology. It seemed second nature to involve people in the design of their own futures (as much as any of us can) long before I knew the community development principal that the experts in any problem are the people experiencing it. In the late 1990s, I connected with the work of The Oxford Development Education Centre (ODEC) which significantly used Participatory Appraisal (PA), for many, the springboard to Appreciative Inquiry. Parallel to that, I was doing a Masters in Education with taught research methodologies, so I was already uncomfortable that no matter how much PA would listen and include, it didn't always seek to find future clear direction. With that frustration, I worked with ODEC practitioners to develop ways of groups of people framing their own questions, choosing ways to collect data using the wide range of PA methodologies and others they designed, then teaching the experts (community members experienced in their own issues) how to collect data amongst their peers. Once data was collected, we used analysis events with a wide range of stakeholders from community experts to public sector workers and managers to find meaning and pose direction. When I fell into AI via Appreciating Church, I already knew the territory and happily welcomed what my experience of PA was missing – design and delivery.

What I notice is that even before we embark on formal AI structure to observe and support organisations and individuals in their work, we are already operating with or choose two principles – anticipatory and positive. We anticipate that people will be kind, authentic, and seek the common good. We anticipate this so much that we shape our planning around this anticipation. As we plan, we imbue our anticipation with positive energy. Then when we start our workshops or connections with people using AI, we immediately realise the simultaneity principle. Everyone arrives with their own experiences and history, demonstrating that multiple truths occupy the same space and time. As people engage in conversations and activities, they exhibit the constructionist principle as they bring their own constructs of truth and reality and compare them with each other. The poetic principle, of using whatever creative language, media, and skills we can to imagine new realities, underpins all of AI as

both practitioner and participants ebb and flow to hear, reframe, design and move on. AI is a dynamic and authentic cycle, happily changing as needed as it reframes negative issues into positive dreams. A gentle nag to my colleagues is that AI doesn't need to be taught as a construct before it is used.

Appreciative practice, principle by principle

Anticipatory
(Image inspires action – imagining a positive future state gives impetus for action and hope)

I've recently been working with leaders in a regional organisation with historic, deep and complex issues. Many people have told me what the organisation has been with examples of a wide variety of consequential damage. Without doubt, each narrator has ended their account with a sigh and no sense of how things could move. I have worked with each one to describe how they feel an organisation such as theirs could work. It has become usual for me to tease out what their role in that organisation should be, with the encouragement to "be the Individual in the organisation which you want the organisation to become." Having worked with them for over six months now, I am hearing from a variety of individuals, not the leaders with whom I'm working, who recount organisational changes with observations of 'a new kind of transparency', 'a budding trust in Y committee', a sense that X is open to conversation. Anticipating a positive future no matter what is the present reality is physically changing this organisation.

I also use this principal when I teach Project Management to individuals in large charities. Each charity course delegate, before the course starts, works on a personal AI SOAR (appendix 1) which has been explained. At our fist teaching session, delegates pair up to share the SOARs, then reframe the whole work with "be the project manager you are proud to be and use the course to decide what you want to add."

Constructionist
(Words create worlds – reality is subjective and socially created)

A few years ago, I designed and co-conducted research to establish if the United Reformed Church needed new worship resources and if so, what. In consultation with a number of people who were interested in the outcome, it became clear that there were multiple ways in which a particular significant worship event was being described. The same event was helpful to one person, diminishing to another. Wonderfully inclusive and lively to yet another and tragically lacking in colour to even another. Same event. It became clear that the research questions needed to acknowledge that the different interpretations arose from the backgrounds and cultures of the narrators; the event was physically the same for everyone. As a consequence, it was decided to circulate two SOARs[1] (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, Results/Resources) - one to worship leaders and one to worship

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[1] SOAR™ originates with Jacqui Stavros and Gina Hinrichs. See their *Thin Book of SOAR 2009 and 2019*

attenders. They were circulated to congregational members at random, distributed by people attending committees in Church House. The committees were chosen because they were interested in the outcome, and predominantly because they were very different to each other. My notion was that the more varied the kind of response because of the difference in culture and experience of the committee, we could capture as many constructs about worship as possible. The delightful research conclusion was that no new worship resources were needed, but that a group to find, curate and categorise would allow each mindset to find a resource it would find helpful.

Simultaneity
(Inquiry creates change – change rises from the recognition that there are simultaneous multiple truths)

Cowley Road consultation, 2002-2003. A throughfare of a significantly multi-use road in an almost city centre location of a multi-cultural, multi-class and multi-faith community received central government funding to rebuild the road to become more safe. A first consultation collected government data, and with PA tools derived community data, exposed the reality of how many people from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds already used, and would perhaps increase their use of this road. We created a map I call an IDCO (Input, Decision, Constraint, Output) to expose these multiple truths as well as to give validity to each constituent in the any decisions. With a cheerful cartoon (sadly not the cartoon but a template, appendix 1), we drew out the range of people who used the road (input) in a large bubble at the top of a page. A big arrow from the bubble moved to a filter shape surrounded by arrows pointing to the funnel of the constraints on any ideas (cost, conditions, materials, permissions and more). The flow from the funnel moved to a box indicating the committee which would make a decision and the final box included how anyone would know the result and participate in the future planning. This exposed the simultaneous community truths at the same time as managing expectations imposed on the outcome from personal/organisational constraints. The ICDO was the equivalent of the research rationale to explain to anyone how they could be involved and how their data and participation would be used. With this in hand, a heap of community members asked two questions with exposed both constructivist truth and anticipatory hope:

- "Tell me one thing you love about X road;
- "What one thing would you change?"

I'm aware that in AI, the simultaneity principle is referenced often with regard to ensuring that opening questions allow/encourage multiple truths and therefore, in classic research language, asking open ended questions. My use of it to date does that, but it also seeks to expose known multiple truths early, hoping for more truths to add to the mix and helping all participants know that they in are in a group of diverse people.

Poetic
(What we focus on grows – using creativity for focus, we are more creative in action)

I'm an artist. Finding creative ways to depict ideas and to imagine futures is my thing and always has been. My tried and tested way to use this principle is something I picked up from PA and extended. I have a fine selection of postcards, all images and no words. I spread them out on tables or floors and ask people to pick one which describes perhaps the present state of them or of something else, or which describes their dream for a future organisation, or project, or themselves. In one situation I facilitated, a local health authority board chose images for how they wanted the board to work then wrote words around their own image. We then looked at the prevalence of words and ideas and ended up with a business plan started from images.

The cards have been used to imagine new projects, new ways of working, new buildings, new organisational cultures, anything. The postcard process releases imagination whilst not exposing lack of craft or art skills. A fine thing, to me.

Positive
(Positive questions lead to positive change – reframing the negative to its positive parallel truth builds a foundation for change)

Like the poetic principle, I am a born positivist, reframing anything which is an issue for me and supporting others to reframe. A wise theologian said, "the reverse is also true" and Jungian psychology backs this up with its talk of the shadow side of ourselves; not a negative side, simply the reverse of the presenting side. To focus on the positive as a deliberate exercise is to reframe a difficult issue or experience by describing the 'also true' from the issue or experience. The reframing is a way of telling the positive truth and reduces the power of the negative. I am often moved by watching people's reactions as they test a reframing of a situation they are in. With questions like, "what else could have been happening?" or "what else can you see there?" they find that they can use the positive reframing to tell the truth, yet a truth which could have been hidden because of their starting focus. When someone says, "I thought I'd never get through X," I remind them that they are present in the very conversation we are having. They did get through. The positive reframe tells the factual truth that they did get through; a mindset changes from one of always being burdened to one of getting through each time. I use it all the time in listening, counselling, coaching and life.

Appendix 1: The ICDO Analysis Map

I - Interest/Information
Who has an interest in the project or organisation or activity? Think of internal and external interest. Who might want to contribute information?

C – Constraints
What would constrain a wealth of ideas?

D – Decision/Deliberation
Who will make the final decision on any new developments or agree any final analysis?

O – Output/Outcome/Options
What will be the output from any decision? Will it be a range of options which will go back through the ICDO for final selection? Or will it be a final decision and if so, how will those with an interest be informed?