Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Appreciative Inquiry Tool 3: Appreciative Inquiry as a Teaching Approach

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

This tool is the final in a series of three, written by Dr Katy Osborne who is a social scientist with a background in psychology and public health, currently working as a Research Fellow at the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based, collaborative approach to organizational change which focuses on understanding the ‘positive core’ of an organization and how this can be strengthened. It involves working through a process referred to as the ‘4D’ or ‘5D’ cycle to bring about positive change (see ‘Appreciative Inquiry Tool 1: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry for Schools’). AI is underpinned by five core principles, all of which are relevant to, and can influence pedagogical practices[[1]](#footnote-1). AI is consistent with constructivist theories of learning and is compatible with pedagogical approaches that focus on active learning, collaboration and asking questions, such as inquiry-based learning.

This tool discusses AI as a teaching approach in schools, and how it can be applied to enhance learning and teaching.

## Ideas

## *How does AI relate to positive education?*

## AI has been aligned with the broader field of positive education, which has a focus on both intellectual and character development[[2]](#footnote-2). Character development refers to the promotion of personal strengths and capabilities in students that are important for well-being, including optimism[[3]](#footnote-3). Positive education and AI share emphasis on identifying and building upon strengths in order to empower individuals, groups and organisations.

## *How has AI been applied in teaching and learning practices?*

AI is the foundation for ‘Appreciative Learning’ (AL); a pedagogical approach that is consistent with constructivist theories of learning, and approaches such as active learning, authentic learning and experiential learning[[4]](#footnote-4). AL recognises that students have strengths, such as ideas, knowledge and skills that teachers can utilise in the education process. As such, AL involves recognising students’ strengths and further developing and building upon these in an active, student-centred and collaborative way, rather than positioning the teacher as ‘expert’. This can involve engaging the students in a 4D cycle process in order to enhance their learning, and enabling them to learn from each other and have input into educational activities and curriculum[[5]](#footnote-5).

AI has been used in studies which seek to explore how to effectively facilitate ‘student voice’, in order to incorporate student perspectives into curriculum and teaching practices. As such, AI is a methodology which has an empowering focus, and can work from the ‘bottom up’ to use student’s insights to inform teaching approaches. In this way, AI can contribute towards developing student-led curriculum and student-led learning and teaching processes. Student-led learning is a form of active learning which empowers students to have direct ownership of the learning process. Benefits of this can include ‘deep’ learning and understanding, and better retention of material[[6]](#footnote-6).

Below, examples are presented of how AI has been applied to engage students in designing their own learning activities, to study student’s experiences and perspectives, and to promote school inclusion.

***Application of AI to Student-led Curriculum and Learning Activities (UK)***

In a U.K. study, AI was used to give three classes of primary school children voice and decision-making power in their learning[[7]](#footnote-7). Using the 4D cycle, children were engaged collaboratively in group work to design their own learning activities[[8]](#footnote-8). This study found that children were able to design innovative and engaging curriculum using the AI process. The conclusion was that AI could transform a culture of student participation in a positive way, but this process needs time[[9]](#footnote-9).

***Application of AI to Studying Student Perspectives (Sweden and USA)***

In a Swedish study, AI was used a research method to facilitate student voice in the research process[[10]](#footnote-10). This involved the researchers exploring student’s experiences of meaningful school situations through a 4D cycle. Student perspectives were gathered through various means at each phase of the 4D cycle:

1. **Discovery –** students contributed drawings, multimodal productions such as digital narratives and posters, and participated in interviews
2. **Dream –** students wrote letters to teachers and shared their dreams with others, particularly about the meaningful situations they wished to create
3. **Design –** students designed classroom activities alongside their teachers
4. **Destiny –** students participated in the activity ‘tell the researcher’ where they reported back to the researcher about what they had done since they researcher’s previous visit, relating to the meaningful situations they identified and wanted to foster in their school[[11]](#footnote-11)

This research identified the importance of multimodal research methods to explore student perspectives, and that adults need to fully support students to imagine visions for school improvement, and to design plans to enact on visions. It was also identified that a whole-school approach is necessary for AI to be a sustainable process[[12]](#footnote-12).

A study in the U.S.A. used AI as a research method to study the perspectives of ‘at-risk’ high school students, in order to consider how pedagogical practices could be improved to meet the needs of these students[[13]](#footnote-13). This study reported on student’s insights after engaging in the ‘discovery’ and ‘dream’ steps of the 4D cycle. Using these AI steps, students were able to reflect on their own positive experiences of learning and good relationships with teachers. From this, it was identified by students that:

* learning should be enjoyable
* applying relevant life experiences to learning is important
* a cooperative and respectful learning environment is highly valued
* family is an important metaphor for the learning environment[[14]](#footnote-14)

These were insights that could influence the ways in which teachers work with ‘at-risk’ students and build upon the positive work already being done[[15]](#footnote-15).

***Application of AI to Promote Inclusive Education (USA)***

Another study in the U.S.A reported on how AI was used to consider how to promote inclusion in secondary schools for young people living with disability. High school teachers were engaged in the process, and were asked about what values, knowledge and skills they should demonstrate in order to successfully achieve an inclusive adolescent education[[16]](#footnote-16). Using the AI process, participants collaborated to identify the important factors for promoting inclusive education:

* values of social justice, passion and courage for change
* skills of listening and communication
* knowledge of adolescent development and best practice research in secondary schools[[17]](#footnote-17)

## Actions

The examples discussed above in the ‘Ideas’ section demonstrate how AI has been successfully used with students and teachers to design meaningful and innovative learning experiences, and to better understand student voice and perspectives and include these in learning and teaching. Furthermore, AI is a useful process for exploring how schools can promote a positive and inclusive culture for all students. When considering how to use AI as a teaching approach, it is necessary to consider that AI is an active, collaborative process that requires interaction between learners. In working through the 4D or 5D process, school students need to be fully supported by adults in the school. School staff may use the examples and information contained in this tool (as well as the two previous tools in this series) to explore how AI can be applied in the education sector, including to learning and teaching at their school within an inclusive education framework.

## More Information

Appreciative questions for team meetings https://www.stepsforward.org/Static/images/modules/40/downloadable/Appreciative%20questions%20for%20team%20meetings.docx

Guidance for successful appreciative interviews <https://edhub.ama-assn.org/data/Journals/steps-forward/937327/10.1001stepsforward.2017.0089supp3.docx>

[Learn to ask the right questions with this blog post](https://cvdl.ben.edu/blog/asking_the_right_questions/) from Center for Values-Driven Leadership https://cvdl.ben.edu/blog/asking\_the\_right\_questions/

The Center for Values-Driven Leadership offers an Appreciative Leadership Executive Workshop Series, along with customized consulting and workshops for companies and organizations https://cvdl.ben.edu/lead-boldly-levels/

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8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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