



Appreciative Inquiry: From Positive Narrative to Systemic Change

“Appreciative Inquiry? Sounds like just another Eduspeak term,” said the overwhelmed secondary teacher dismissively in response to my enthusiastic introduction of this new district initiative. “Just what does that look like in my classroom?”

A very good question, and one I had been pondering myself as one of two newly-hired Learning & Development (L&D) consultants for the Vancouver School District (VSD). It was our task, along with an administrator, to design and implement a new district-wide focus around two core questions: *What Do We Know About Learning?* and *What Are We Doing About It?* No small task indeed!

In the spring of 2005, our newly-formed District Planning Group, composed of all stakeholders in the system – from parents, to custodians, to trustees, to teachers – decided on a new district direction: a collective focus on learning to energize, excite, and engage all members of our learning community. Appreciative Inquiry was the organizational methodology chosen to carry this out.

Both my colleague and I came from a background in secondary school growth planning with a variety of leadership skill sets, but neither of us knew anything about Appreciative Inquiry, nor did our administrator team leader. We were building this from the ground up.

Now, four years later, appreciative approaches and processes are embedded in and permeate our system. Our district’s orientation has shifted to the positive; in all of our undertakings – from school planning, to leadership coaching, to student conferences – we identify strengths and assets first. Our system has been energized and engaged by using inquiry questions in all its operations, from the classroom to employee relations. Just how did this major organizational change come about? Our story follows.

Appreciative Inquiry: Building on Strengths

The L&D team began its work in October 2005 with an introductory training course in Appreciative Inquiry at Simon Fraser University, offered by leading Organizational Change expert, Gervase Bushe, from Simon Fraser’s Sauder School of Business.¹

We learned from Gervase that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) builds on positive experiences to spark positive change by honouring the expertise resident in an organization and its people. It initiates a deliberate, systemic search for assets, competencies, and best practices within the system. The process is narrative-rich, based on personal, positive stories, which help to engage, to foster learning, and to deepen respect among participants. The AI process is inclusive and collaborative, giving all stakeholders an equal voice. Together those voices make meaning (a co-construction of knowledge) while engaging and shifting the very change they are developing together.

AI was music to the ears of VSD educators, long accustomed to the very negative public discourse around public education. With AI, we were affirming that the system was not broken as we began to inventory our strengths and assets with our two core questions in mind: what do we know about learning, and what are we doing about it?

AI uncovers what works well in a system and devises ways to expand upon these strengths. Rather than dwelling on problems and finding even more of them (the usual organizational ‘improvement’ process), AI honours the best

in our people and schools. In the VSD, it unleashed innovation and imagination, built and expanded our capacity to cooperate, and fostered shared leadership and responsibility.

AI is not driven by numerical data but by the depth of the stories arising from the variety of stakeholders’ experiences of the school system. AI stories are prompted by a positive question like the one framing the 2005-06 system-wide Inquiry on Adolescent Learning: “What do educators do that creates exceptional learning experiences?” The resultant story responses empower as they inventory – in this case – exceptional practices across our system. School sites also developed their own affirmative questions, like Main Street Adult Education Centre’s “What are the advantages of the quarter (timetable) system?” or Sir Charles Tupper Secondary School’s “What is a positive experience you’ve had that has made you a better reader?”

An AI cycle consists of four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. Storytelling, catalyzed by an affirmative question, defines the Discovery phase as participants interview one another and write the most compelling story they hear. We heard of the shy Grade 4 student who became much more confident after his teacher enlisted his help teaching a group of Grade 1 students once a week. We learned about the teacher with no art-teaching experience who became a successful and creative specialist art teacher, thanks to mentoring from another teacher and support from her principal. We learned of the pride and caring of the teacher who tutored a Grade 12 single mother and then watched her walk across the stage with her young son to receive her diploma. These and many other stories revealed the wealth, strengths, and depth of commitment across our system.

OUR DISTRICT’S ORIENTATION HAS SHIFTED

TO THE POSITIVE; IN ALL OF OUR UNDERTAKINGS –

FROM SCHOOL PLANNING, TO LEADERSHIP

COACHING, TO STUDENT CONFERENCES –

WE IDENTIFY STRENGTHS AND ASSETS FIRST.

EN BREF Que savons-nous au sujet de l'apprentissage? Que faisons-nous en conséquence? La Commission scolaire de Vancouver a cherché à répondre à ces questions en 2005, utilisant l'outil organisationnel de l'enquête appréciative (EA). L'EA tire parti des expériences positives pour amorcer le changement, reconnaissant ainsi les compétences et la réussite. Le processus part du partage d'anecdotes de succès, pour ensuite visionner, planifier et instaurer le changement. Chaque enquête est centrée sur une question affirmative, telle que : « Comment les éducateurs créent-ils des expériences d'apprentissage exceptionnelles? » En quatre ans, la commission scolaire a fait des enquêtes sur l'apprentissage des adolescents, les apprenants autochtones et les personnes apprenant l'anglais. En plus d'identifier les attributs essentiels d'une expérience d'apprentissage optimale, l'enquête appréciative a engendré une mentalité positive gagnante qui représente l'un des résultats les plus précieux du processus.

Stories from the Discovery phase were shared at school site meetings where team leaders and participants derived wisdom and meaning from those data, extracting key ideas about learning in order to spark new thinking. At some sites these findings were compiled into Discovery Documents, which were read by all in the school community and used to develop directions unique to each site – e.g., “What we do to create confident math learners.”

Such affirmative topics became the focus for two-day summits (sessions with participants from all stakeholder groups) during which schools completed the remaining three phases (Ds) of the AI cycle. Much hope and positive, sustained energy emerged from these summits, as the following quote reveals.

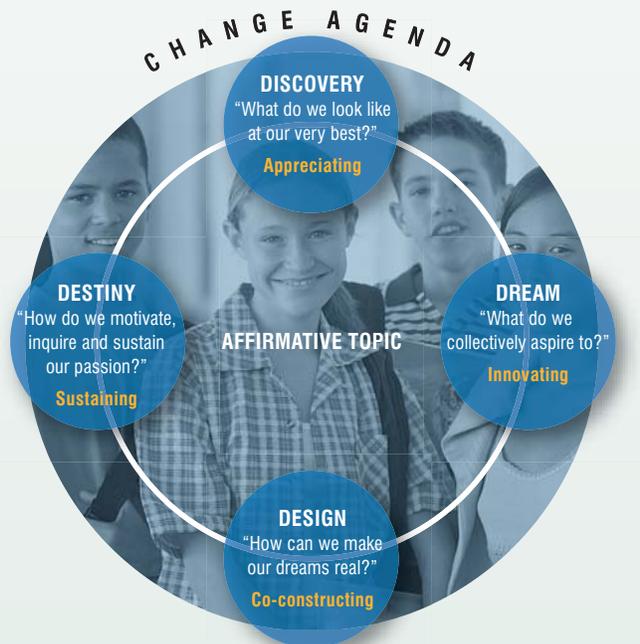
“At the AI Summit, I think I came closest to feeling the sense of fulfillment I always wanted to feel in a school setting. It was to me what school is supposed to be about. It was about the development of a community of people around a single vision and a positive vision at that...It was about asking how we are going to take the strengths we have and really take it to the next level. How are we going to really ensure that we value the students that we have and make sure that every aspect of their lives is fantastic?”

Carl Jantze, Teacher, Templeton Secondary

During the Dream phase, through visual imagery, participants share their hopes and dreams and create inspiring images of the future. For example, this dream emerged during Britannia Secondary School's 2006 Summit: “Parents will be welcomed in the school with a special place for parents to gather.” And this from Gladstone Secondary School: “Learning about other cultures and faiths should be central to curriculum, including everything from experiencing world music to taking Tai Chi. It is exposure to many ideas that makes the mind expand.”

The 4D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry

Source: Vancouver School Board and Gervase Bushé “Appreciative Inquiry Training” September 2007



During the Design phase, each group's collective dreams were shaped into structures, processes, and behaviours. Good design statements need to be provocative, in that they stretch or challenge the status quo, yet also grounded and achievable. From the 2007 Aboriginal Learning Inquiry came: “We acknowledge and respect the Aboriginal belief in the sacredness of life long learning and knowledge of the land! In our school we use locally developed Aboriginal content that includes knowledge, history, and cultural information. Through this we recognize the interconnectedness of all cultures.”

In the Destiny phase, we moved from vision to reality by translating the design statements into action plans, which were later shared and expanded upon with members of the school community who were unable to attend the summit. The Tupper and Livingstone Schools summit topic, ‘Building Learning Relationships for Engagement and Empowerment’, included actions to conduct regular forums of staff and students to ensure their voices were directing school plans and to support math/science

meetings between Grade 7 Livingstone teachers and Grade 8 Tupper teachers. The Destiny phase of the Aboriginal Learning Inquiry inspired schools to organize Aboriginal student forums, offer peer mentorship programs, and invite Aboriginal community and family members to help plan celebrations, family days, etc. Destiny activities are ongoing as the outcomes often stimulate follow-through actions and changes as well as new applications of Inquiry. And so the AI cycle continues.

Appreciative Inquiry Over Four Years

For three successive years, we employed a district-wide approach to implementing AI. The first year, 2005-6, our inquiries into adolescent learning involved 22 schools with learners aged 12 to adult. Each site held its own summit during which the L&D Team coached and facilitated the process. We trained staff in interviewing and in developing and implementing change plans, and we followed up with each site over a three-year period.

MANY OF THESE ESSENTIAL ATTRIBUTES ARE CONSIDERED 'BEST PRACTICE' AMONG LEADING EDUCATORS, BUT THEY HAVE A PARTICULAR RESONANCE FOR US BECAUSE THEY AROSE FROM THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF REPRESENTATIVES FROM EVERY CORNER OF OUR DISTRICT.

In Year Two, the Aboriginal Learners Inquiry asked: “What do we know about Aboriginal learning?” Answers to this question not only revealed best practices with Aboriginal learners, but also affirmed that these practices benefit all learners. Design plans included teaching about medicinal uses of indigenous plants by the Coast Salish people in Science 9, enhancing learning for all students as well as substantiating the knowledge base of Aboriginal cultures.

Our last district-wide Inquiry was the English Language Learners Inquiry (ELLI), which resulted in immediate and substantial changes, from multilingual welcoming signs in schools to collaborative curriculum units. Most of all, it provided a venue for voice, recognizing that despite language differences, ESL parents want to be partners in their children’s education, and schools can provide the vehicle for that dialogue. Multicultural feast nights with translation are now common practice in ELLI and other schools.

In Year Three, the team delighted in shifting to the more action-oriented second core question, “What Are We Doing About It (Learning)?” Our first two years had laid an appreciative foundation to critically inquire into action. Now, examining what we are doing about learning in our classrooms heightened our attention on student engagement and ensured that the work of the inquiries would not become just another ‘binder on the shelf’. Instead it was becoming the living reality of a systemic desire to uncover and extend best practice. This transitional year saw our team shape the inspiring systemic shift from intention to action around organizational learning.

In our final year, the L&D Team continued to encourage the system-wide use of an appreciative lens, starting from strengths, leading to dreaming and designing about where a school community would like to be. We implemented appreciative team-building sessions with school staffs; we developed our own Appreciative Leadership course for teachers and administrators, focussing on finding ways to encourage what they do well; we led small school groups in asking key questions around their own practice; our district plan document was rewritten to focus on what our learners can do, rather than on a statistical accounting. School plans are now generated through a discovery, dream, and design cycle, engaging far more of the school community.

September 2007 saw us extend appreciative approaches across the province, as we presented a two day session on ‘Using Appreciative Inquiry within the Public School System’. In association with Dr. Gervase Bushe, we trained over 60 people in the utilization of narrative and AI’s 4D cycle for application to their own contexts.

What We Know About Learning

The narrative experience of a King George Secondary School student best describes the results of the first two years of the Learning Inquiries. She told of working with a small group of students to create a film on a global issue. Challenged by tough deadlines (making a short documentary in seven days!), and the need to immediately grasp new technologies, she found the self-directed project exhilarating: “[because] there were no adults involved to guide us...also because it allowed us to concentrate on this one task, without having

to worry about schoolwork or tests.” After creating the film, she and her group presented it to a symposium attended by students from other schools: “We found out that their points of view on the subject were quite different from ours, so we got to learn even more even after we finished our project!”

Her story illustrates six core attributes of an optimal learning experience that formed the answer to our first question. Working with a small group of students on a single project created a sense of belonging as they prepared for and participated in the symposium; the trust accorded by her teachers reflected strong teacher-student relationships and provided a safe environment within which she and the other students felt free to take risks with their learning; being released from regular academic expectations so she could give the project her full attention showed flexibility on the part of her teachers and administrators; creating a film is clearly experiential learning that embraces a range of learning styles; and the attribute, passionate teaching, in this instance, was evident in the fertile context created behind the scenes by the educators who structured the project and by the opportunity it afforded students to “learn something that we were interested in, by ourselves and then teach others about it.”

Many of these essential attributes are considered ‘best practice’ among leading educators, but they have a particular resonance for us because they arose from the lived experience of representatives from every corner of our district and from an inclusive dialogue process that produced a collective sense of ownership and generated lasting change.

L Learning	Diverse learning styles are respected and supported.
E Experiential	Relevant, engaging, experiential learning opportunities beyond the classroom are routine.
A Active, Passionate Teaching	Active learning experiences are created by teachers passionate about their work.
R Relationships	Relationships are valued, cultivated and supported by all.
N Need for flexibility and choice	Flexibility and choice in the classroom, school and system is accommodated.
S Safety	A safe and supportive environment exists.