

# A Multidisciplinary View of Appreciative Inquiry through Action Research : Crossing Borders

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# **A Multidisciplinary View of Appreciative Inquiry through Action Research: Crossing Borders**

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## **Introduction of Appreciative Inquiry (AI)**

Wikipedia (accessed Sept 25, 2014) introduces AI thusly:

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a model for analysis, decision-making and the creation of strategic change, particularly within companies and other organizations. It was developed at Case Western Reserve University's department of Organizational behavior, starting with a 1987 article by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva. They felt that the overuse of "problem solving" as a model often held back analysis and understanding, focusing on problems and limiting discussion of new organizational models.[1]

Cooperrider and Srivastva took a social constructionist approach, saying that "organisations are created, maintained and changed by conversations, and claiming that methods of organizing were only limited by people's imaginations and the agreements among them.[2] In 1990, Cooperrider and Diana Whitney published an article outlining the five principles of AI[3]... Positive publicity around that work led to calls for a "how to" manual for implementing the model ... Cooperrider resisted this for many years, wanting people to focus on the theory and to innovate with methods. As a result, different approaches to AI have flourished around the world.

Let us see another introduction to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with a short summary

from the UK National Foundation of Educational Research report 2009 on “Appreciative Inquiry in Educational Research: Possibilities and Limitations.”

AI is a relatively new theory which takes a positive approach to organisational development. It aims to identify good practice, design effective development plans, and ensure implementation. It focuses the research process around what works, rather than trying to fix what does not. AI therefore presents an alternative to the problem-solving approach underpinning action research and offers an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice. AI's originators, Cooperider and Srivastva (1987) criticised the lack of a useful theory generated by traditional action research studies and claimed that the problem solving theory underpinning action research is to blame. They challenged the fact that action researchers tend to assume that their purpose is to solve a problem and thus groups and organisations are treated not only as if they have problems, but also as if they are problems to be solved. Cooperider and Srivastva argued that this view of organising and researching reduces the possibility of generating new theory and new images of the future. As an alternative, they devised the AI model as a change management process using the positive experiences of an organisation or group to bring about change.

Most recent AI books we have read present the following principles, assumptions, and cycles which help to clarify some of the processes of AI (see Specific AI References and Resources, at the end of this article):

## 5 Principles

1. The Constructionist Principle: Human knowledge and organizational destiny are interwoven.
2. The Principle of Simultaneity: Inquiry and change are not truly separate moments but are simultaneous.
3. The Poetic Principle: Human organizations are more like an open book than say a machine.
4. The Anticipatory Principle: The infinite human knowledge we have for generating constructive organizational change is our collective imagination and discourse about the future.
5. The Positive Principle: That building and sustaining momentum for change requires large amounts of positive affect and social bonding – things like hope, excitement, inspiration, caring, camaraderie, sense of urgent purpose, and sheer joy in creating something meaningful together.

## 8 Assumptions

- 1) In every group something works
- 2) What we focus on becomes reality
- 3) Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities
- 4) The act of asking questions of a group influences the group in some way
- 5) People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they can carry parts of the past.
- 6) If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past
- 7) It is important to value differences
- 8) The language we use creates our reality

4D cycles

*Discover* the positive with positive questions – the best of what is

*Dream* as a way of exploring possibilities, collecting ideas and inspiration – the best of what might be

*Design* possible interventions by considering what came out of the Discover and Dream data and making it into “provocative propositions.”

*Destiny* is about communicating the positive findings far, wide, and iteratively

For this article we wish to report on our research activities and attempts at introducing *Appreciative Inquiry* (AI) to our classes and our faculty. Also, we each have our own special areas of expertise and we decided to collaborate so that we could learn more from each other. We would next like to describe how we see Self-Determination Theory (SDT), sociocultural theories (Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory, Language Socialization Theory, and Bakhtin’s dialogism), and Positive Psychology as they relate to AI and to each other and overlap in several ways. Then in the remainder of the article, we wish to describe two AI processes that we explored in our classes with our students and one small intervention with our faculty.

### **Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Positive Psychology, and AI**

SDT asserts that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are innate needs that humans wish to satisfy; they help people to be more self-determining (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory states that intrinsic motivation and different degrees of extrinsic motivation influence the degree of self-determination, which in turn affects self-regulation (See Fig. 1).

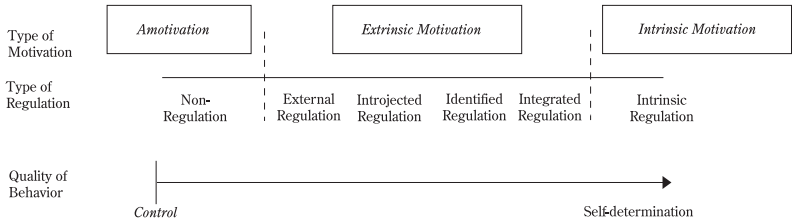


Figure 1. Continuum of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2002, p. 16)

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), a macro-theory of motivation, personality, and optimal functioning, has theorized that the concept of basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy provide the basis for predicting whether the social world will promote versus impair the positive outcomes that have been the focus of positive psychology (Deci & Vansteenkiste, 2004).

### Related Concepts

1. **Learner motivation** (Dörnyei, 2005): (1) *the ideal L2 self* (i.e., all forms of intrinsic motivation, e.g., hopes and desires), (2) *the ought-to L2 self* (the extrinsic motives which an individual thinks he or she ought to have), and (3) *the L2 learning experience* (i.e. the motives related to the immediate learning environment)

2. **Self-efficacy**: Self-efficacy has a profound effect on learning outcomes. Four factors that improve self-efficacy beliefs were identified: (a) performance accomplishment, (b) vicarious experience, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d)

reduction of anxiety (Bandura, 1986).

### **3. Appreciative Inquiry and Self-Determination Theory**

AI attempts to allow the mind to focus for a while on what may already be within a learner's control and to appreciate intrinsic motivators. AI might ask students to judge their degrees of autonomy, competence, and relatedness and to decide what activities might promote the cultivation of these to a greater degree:

#### **Autonomy**

1. How much control do you have over your learning right now?
2. How much more control would you like and how could you get it?

#### **Competence**

3. How competent do you feel now and to what degree do you feel you are increasing your competence?
4. How could you increase your competence more efficiently?

#### **Relatedness**

5. How much is your desire to learn the language related to other desires in your life?
6. How much is your desire to learn the language related to people who also value this language?

### **Sociocultural Theory and Language Socialization**

Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (henceforth SCT) and language socialization can be considered as sociocultural theories because of their focus on the situated nature of learning and development (Duff & Kobayashi, 2010). SCT, which originates from the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978), concerns "how humans think through the creation and use of mediating tools" (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011, p. x). Vygotsky (1978) wrote that optimal learning "awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in

cooperation with his peers” (p. 90), proposing the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). While developed to explain children’s learning and development, this theory has recently informed research in a wide range of areas including L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Swain et al., 2011; van Lier, 1996). As Wells (1999) puts it, in educational settings, learning and teaching in the ZPD typically takes place through “face-to-face interaction mediated by speech” (p. 319). The theory of language socialization has foundations in linguistic anthropology and holds that children and other newcomers become more competent members of their community as they engage in the practices of their community with more experienced members and observe the actions of other members (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012). Like SCT, language socialization emphasizes language-mediated interaction as a major locus of learning and socialization. Appreciative Inquiry could be seen as a meta-mediating tool. What we are finding is that asking AI questions creates what is called “expansive learning” in which new learning emerges which broadens our goals, desires, and outcomes (see Murphey, 2014 below).

SCT and language socialization can inform appreciative inquiry as they both acknowledge the mutuality of learning/socialization. Language socialization theory acknowledges that socialization processes are bidirectional or even multidirectional in that they involve not only old-timers’ efforts to apprentice newcomers into the social practices of their community, but also interaction between old-timers and newcomers that shape each other’s knowledge and social roles and identities (Duff & Talmy, 2011; Ochs, 1990). Similarly, van Lier (1996) proposed the notion of multiple zones of proximal development, arguing that the



zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be constructed not only when learners receive assistance from experts, but also when they work with equal peers or even less experienced members (see also Wells, 1999) and when they work on their own using their inner resources (e.g., experience, strength). Importantly, both theories conceive learners as active agents whose actions and perceptions mediate their own and others' learning and socialization.

Also relevant to Appreciative Inquiry is Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *response*. Bakhtin argued that each utterance is a response to previous utterances and that response serves as a foundation for understanding. According to Bakhtin, "Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and responses are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (p. 282). As Gergen, Gergen, and Barrett (2004) put it, the AI process generally "depends upon people relating to each other through dialogic forms of inquiry" (p. 4), including interviews and story-telling. As such, Appreciative Inquiry, as a strength-based approach which highlights the positive aspects of people and their community, has the great potential of creating opportunities for learning and socialization through joint engagement in various activities.

### **Positive Psychology**

The positive psychology movement was officially begun by the American Psychological Association (APA) president Martin Seligman in 1998 at the national APA convention in San Francisco (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011, p. 6). "One reason for the rapid growth of positive psychology has been the

tremendous interest in ‘positive interventions’” (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011 p. 7). Five years later an applied version of it was started (Linley et al., 2011, p. 365) and much interest put forward for an organizational form of it:

In 2004, Harvard Business Review listed positive psychology as one of the 20 breakthrough ideas for organizational management, and within five years, an entire 26-chapter volume had been completed that is focused exclusively on the organizational applications of positive psychology—the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work* (Linley, Harrington, & Garcea, 2010).

However, outside of the positive psychology field, other positive trends had been going on for some time to look at the positive rather than the problems, such as Appreciative Inquiry which was started a decade before (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Linley et al (2011) mention Appreciative Inquiry, Maslow, and Drucker, among others, as being several of the many threads of positive psychology that created the “zeitgeist of which positive psychology is both cause and effect” (p. 366). We might add that Self-Determination Theory and Sociocultural Theory, as well as many other threads, have turned our own attention to attempt understanding how our positive attributes might also be better used to improve teaching, learning, and living.

### **From Theory to Practice**

Next we look at three qualitative studies of how asking our students and colleagues positive questions might effect them and provoke learning. First (A) is a simple question (*Have you noticed yet what a wonderful person you are?*) that students can

ask each other and then take outside the class to explore others' reactions. Second (B) concerns *Ideal* Classmates which has been successful in previous studies (Murphey et al., 2013; Murphey & Iswanti, 2014). All three writers did these interventions in our classes and found them useful but we are only reporting a few examples from each. Third (C) we look at a not so successful attempt with our university faculty survey. Finally, we look at how AI provokes expansive learning and how our fields inter-relate.

### (A) The Wonderful Question!

Our **first example** is simply a positive question that students can ask each other in and out of class. Teachers can easily follow the three steps below:

1. **Speed dictation:** The teacher reads the question to students at natural speed three times and has them write it down. Then she encourages them to work in pairs and to help each other.

Have you realized yet what a wonderful person you are?

じぶんが、なんて素晴らしいにんげんであるか、わかっていましたか？

2. **Inquiry:** She encourages them to ask the question to each other in pairs and to talk about the topic as much as they wish. Later, she asks them to report their responses to the question and what they discussed afterwards.
3. **Extended inquiry:** The teacher encourages students to ask the question to other people outside the class and report their responses in the next class meeting.

#### (Possible Addition: Presuppositions)

2.2 (optional) Explain that this question is special because it contains a “**positive presupposition**.” Whether a person answers *Yes* or *No* they are only answering the “Have you realized yet?” part. That “they are a wonderful person” is not in question, it is a *presupposed* idea. Students might try to make other questions with positive presuppositions: Example: **Are you going to enjoy doing your homework this afternoon or tonight?** (*Presupposition:* You are going to enjoy doing your HW at some time! Just tell me when!)

**Examples of Wonderful Question short Reports In Class: English Teaching Methodology classes (3rd-year students) September 2014 (Onoda)**

I (Onoda) encouraged my students to ask the “Wonderful” question to each other in pairs and to talk about the topic as much as they wished. Later, they reported their partner’s responses and reasons. Contrary to my expectation, among the 16 students, 7 said yes, and 9 said no. Given the typical Japanese temperament of being modest, I had thought that most of them would say something like “No. In fact, I’m not so wonderful.” I think the reasons they gave revealed their innermost feelings.

(A) Reasons for yes:

- I think I’m kind. I usually try to listen to the problems my friends have and help them solve them.
- I think I’m good because I got As in all the subjects I took last year.
- I always try to learn from others, and I have learned that feeling happy is the most important thing.
- I’m always motivated to study very hard.
- Although I don’t think I’m a wonderful person, some people around me say so.

(B) Reasons for no:

- I have several parts of my personality. One of them is that I’m sneaky and mean.
- I don’t have confidence in speaking English and using grammar and vocabulary correctly. (3)
- I’m not confident in my appearances.
- I have lost confidence in my English studies.
- My girlfriend doesn’t think I’m a wonderful person and her attitude toward me proves it.

**Examples of Wonderful Question short Reports in their Action Logs:  
Freshman class September 2014 Out of class (Murphey)**

I (Murphey) also asked my students to ask each other the Wonderful Question in class and I then asked them to ask others outside of class to see what reaction they might get. Below, one student reports on how another student seemed to change his understanding of himself. The second one noticed how younger and older people might respond differently. And the third person created a process in which interlocutors might exchange positive information about each other with good consequences, leading most probably to expansive learning.

1. I called [my partner] on Wednesday night and we talked for 15 minutes about dinner of the day and about each favorite book. I also asked him, "Have you realized yet what a wonderful person you are?" In the class, he answered "No!" every time. But finally he said, "...ok...YES!!" to me. It was really funny because he could realize himself!
2. I asked 10 people the "Wonderful?" question, 3 said yes, and 7 said no. I was surprised with this result. Because all my friends said no! The people who said yes are my father and grand father and my grandmother! I asked, "Why do you think you are a wonderful person?" Each of them said, "I have confidence in myself." I thought I want to be able to say that in my future!
3. I asked 4 friends the "Wonderful?" question, they all answered "no" because they don't know their wonderful points. So I told them their wonderful points. They said, "Thank you very much!" And they told me my good points. I was so happy!

In the above two classes, a simple question with brief answers spurred deeper

inquiry and understanding and most probably spread more positivity in students networks. For some we detect the opening up of expansive learning (described in more detail below).

## **(B) Ideal Classmates**

### **Background**

For several years now a group of teacher-researchers in the Tokyo area have been asking students at the beginning of the spring semester: *Please describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?* (Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, 2014). Teachers often made lists of student responses (without names) and gave them back to the particular classes to read a few days later which let students know what others in their class wanted. Some of these responses included showing care and respect toward other classmates, sharing common goals to improve English, being patient and accepting of other's abilities and mistakes, and getting together outside of class to complete homework.

Around midterm the first year, the 449 comments were condensed into 16 descriptors and were looped (Murphey & Falout, 2010, 2012) back to students ( $N = 341$ ) attached with a follow-up survey. For each descriptor we asked the students how much they agreed with the following three statements, using a six-point semantic Likert scale: a. *This is important for successful learning*, b. *My classmates have done this so far this semester*, and c. *I have done this so far this semester*. (See ideal classmates links and resources in the references.)

The results indicated high levels of agreement for each statement, with high correlations between what students thought was important, how their classmates

behaved toward them, and how they themselves behaved as Ideal Classmates toward their peers. These pedagogical and research procedures provoked many students into thinking about how they themselves could help others, what we call *reciprocal idealizing*. For example, one student, when asked ‘What do you think of this research?’ responded:

I could know what is ideal person. Now I will try to be a ideal person. And I'll try to enjoy studying English, talk with my classmates in English more. I think that my motivation becomes high because of this survey.

**Ideal Classmates with a Group of first-year undergraduate students:  
(Kobayashi)**

A class of 20 first-year Japanese undergraduate students were asked: *Please describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?* Their responses were typed up and returned to them, at which point they were asked to read all the responses and provide written comments on each of them. This was followed by a small group discussion of what they thought made an ideal classmate. As a homework assignment, each student wrote a short essay to reflect on his/her learning from this experience. Qualitative analysis of the data using constant comparison revealed interrelated themes, such as sharing ideas and opinions, accepting strengths and weaknesses, listening attentively and supportively, and teaching and learning from each other.

In their essays, students responded to their classmates’ responses to the AI question. For example, one female student wrote about the importance of

improving together through friendly rivalry.

...I was moved by one of my classmates' opinions. That is "We can be not only good friends, but also good rivals." In other words, if we could have positive motivation, we must be able to improve each other. It is an advantage of classes which make students cooperate in studying. (Student A)

The students all acknowledged the importance of working together; however, more than two thirds emphasized their desire to work with classmates who are either more proficient or equally proficient in English. This seems to represent a static and unidirectional view of expert-novice relationships. In contrast, the following students seem to value what each student brings with him/her into the classroom, acknowledging the dynamic and multifaceted nature of expertise, which has been reported in sociocultural studies (Duff & Kobayashi, 2010; Wells, 1999).

When I knew my classmate's opinions, some students wanted to study with people who have high level's skills of English, and others wanted to study with people whose grade is similar to them. However, in my university, there are many people and people who have various skills relating to language. Therefore, we can sometimes become a teacher, and also, we can sometimes become a student. In other words, we can help each other, so in this situation, individual skills were not so important. After all, when you have anything you do not understand, you can ask someone. Also, when your friends need to help, you can support them within the limits of your ability. It is important for us to



help each other. (Student B)

...to teach English each other is a good way to learn English. I think it is good. In class, there are a lot of people who have each good skills. So people utilize each good point and then each can improve English skills. In my case, I'm good at reading so I want to support classmates by utilizing this skill. On the other hand, I'm not good at speaking so I want classmates to support it. (Student C)

These are still minority voices in the focal class, but have a chance to be heard and responded to through continuous AI efforts and critical participatory looping (Murphey & Falout, 2010, 2012) in which teachers return the whole class feedback to students for further consideration.

Paralleling the field of appreciative inquiry (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012), reciprocal idealizing potentiates positive adaptations by shifting from questions about others to questions about themselves, provoking transitional states in many of our students. In other words, students change themselves in order to change their world.

### **(C) Faculty Survey**

At the beginning of the academic year 2014 an emailed question, in English and Japanese, was sent to all our faculty at our university asking a similar question as the ideal classmates one above, but oriented toward teachers: *How might other co-workers help you to have a great day and a meaningful life? What would you see them do or say?*

Unfortunately, out of the 196 full time teachers at KUIS, only 12 were sent back, 5 from Japanese staff and 7 from ELI staff. Still they gave interesting comments and displayed desires to form better communities recognizing that friendly and helpful co-workers could make our lives “together” much better.

For example, Person A stated:

*I would appreciate when hearing "I would help you when you need some help." "We help each other when the other needs help (Otagaisama)."*

And Person F wrote:

*I like co-workers who are positive, say hello and return my smiles. Sharing ideas, articles, links with each other is nice and makes you feel an accepted part of a community.*

Of course in a classroom, we can usually get feedback from all participants, but an emailed survey is easy to disregard in our busy lives. Still we need to think of better ways to engage our co-workers in quality critical thinking about ways to appreciate what we already have that is working well and to adjust to what is not working well.

### **Conclusions and Expansive Learning**

A recent description of expansive learning (Sannino & Ellis, 2014) describes it thusly:

Expansive learning is essentially learning something that is not yet there. This

goes beyond the acquisition of already well-established sets of knowledge and the participation in relatively stable practices. This is a creative type of learning in which learners join their forces to literally create something new. The metaphor of expansion depicts the multidirectional movement of learners constructing and implementing a new, wider, and more complex object for their activity. In expansive learning, the object of the activity is reconceptualized and transformed with the help of the mediating means employed and built throughout the process. (p. 8)

And Davis and Sumara (2006) also write of expansion:

Education—and by implication, educational research—conceived in terms of expanding the space of the possible rather than perpetuating entrenched habits of interpretation, then, must be principally concerned with ensuring the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined. (p. 135)

As researchers, we all have our own particular fields of specialization and yet we believe that we have been able to collaborate and expand our own learning through attempting things we have never done before and reaping the benefits of the “as-yet unimagined.” By asking our students and colleagues Appreciative Inquiry type questions (although we certainly did not take them through the whole theoretical practices), we opened the door to their expansive learning and creativity so that they might realize things of value that we may not be giving enough attention. We were able to tap into what Vygotsky referred to as the *intermental* resources of social mediation (SCT) at the large scale of a socially intelligent dynamic system

(SINDYS, Murphey, 2013), and thus expand our relatedness, competence, and autonomy (SDT), and discover a type of positivity resonance (Fredrickson, 2013) with our students. We are looking forward to expanding even more with our appreciative inquiries.

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### **Web resources**

<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/> “appreciative inquiry in education”

Good introductory article <http://www.newhorizons.org/trans/henry.htm>

An Appreciative Inquiry with Kindergarten Students Jackie Stavros accessed at

<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/practice/toolsQuestionsDetail.cfm?coid=5121>

### **Ideal Classmates Resources** (Murphey’s articles at

<https://kandaeli.academia.edu/TimMurphey>)

Murphey, T. (2012). Ideal classmates research notes. *PeerSpectives*, 9 24-26.

Murphey, T. (2013). *Ideal Classmates and Reciprocal Idealizing through Critical Participatory Looping (CPL) in Socially Intelligent Dynamic Systems (SINDYS)* [.mp4 file, pdf file] (NFLRC Video #25). Honolulu: University of Hawai’i, National Foreign Language Resource Center. doi: [hdl.handle.net/10125/14566](http://hdl.handle.net/10125/14566)

The Altruistic Turn [goodcountry.org](http://goodcountry.org)

PCOlz Resources Web Page (Tetsuya Fukuda) For many surveys and a few articles:

<http://www3.hp-ez.com/hp/englisheducation/page3>