



The implementation of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to gain 'buy-in' from academic staff for improved e-learning practices

(Part of a presentation at the EDMEDIA 08 conference and will appear in the Conference Proceedings)

This paper outlines the overall approach to the e-Learning Pathfinder ENTICE Project at Brunel University. The aim of the investigation was to explore good e-learning practices being implemented by staff, particularly within u-Link, Brunel's virtual learning environment. The project entailed a campus-wide study (involving eight Schools) and made use of an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) methodology - an engaging participative process that has the potential to lead to a more dynamic organisation.

Rather than focussing on traditional change management processes which predispose the investigation towards problem-solving and concentrates on the negative or what is not working, AI is distinctively different being an approach for catalysing positive change (see Figure 1). To quote, "AI is based on the simple assumption that every organisation has something that works well and these strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change" (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005). Furthermore, a considerable of organisations have embarked on AI initiatives, for example, NASA, Save the Children and the United States Navy and is in fact one of today's most preferred change methods.

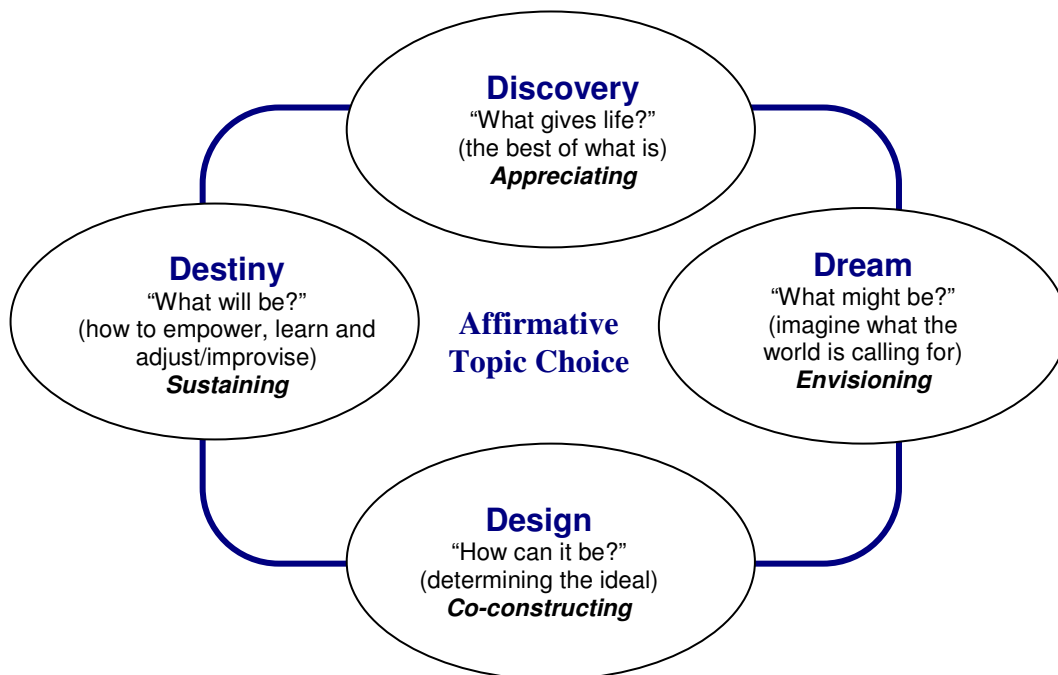


Figure 1: Appreciative Inquiry 4D Cycle with the Affirmative Topic Choice at the centre. This topic is highly significant because it determines the focus of the investigation.

ENTICE - through Appreciative Inquiry

Every AI investigation is unique to that organisation. In this study, we tailored the '4D' model to accommodate the specific purpose of the ENTICE project. The 'Dream' phase was renamed the 'Development Event' and the last two phases of the cycle 'Design' and 'Destiny' were combined to form the 'Summit Event'.

Initially, we began by formulating the Affirmative Topic Choice: "(Ways of) creating and sustaining outstanding e-pedagogic teaching and learning". Next, staff were invited to an initial meeting (one meeting per School) to learn about the Project and come on board. Following on from this, each participating member of staff took part in the *Discovery Event*, namely, a 45-minute interview. The AI-based interview protocol comprised of a carefully designed set of questions to promote positive narrative / rich communication and to discover a person's past and present experiences (in relation to e-learning in the context of u-Link) with a concluding question targeting their future desires. All interviewees from a particular School then came together later for a *Development Event*. This 45-minute gathering enabled the Project team to report back to the interviewees on the findings and for them to collectively share and reflect on their sound e-learning practices. Furthermore, the findings were formulated around a set of eight educational considerations which formed one of the deliverables:

- outcomes-based learning
- active learning
- collaborative learning
- student-centred learning
- learning styles
- independent learning
- feedback
- reflection

<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/life/study/computing/weblearn/enticepathfinderproject/>

A 'quotable quotes gallery' was also created and displayed in the meeting room, which consisted of individual posters (one for each participant) depicting their future aspirations. The next event (akin the AI 'Design' stage) was named the *Pre-Summit Event*, which was essentially a meeting with the teaching staff to inform them of the findings of the investigation for the School and a demonstration of the positive impact of e-learning (with accompanying student evaluation data and u-Link usage statistics to support the findings). The final stage of the cycle, named the *Summit Event* (four Schools per event), consists of a 2-hour workshop involving representatives from each of the Schools. Here, each School was encouraged to reflect on the findings presented at their Pre-Summit Event and to map the School's effective e-learning practices to their e-learning vision / strategy, or if one did not already exist, to articulate a set of long term e-learning objectives from which a strategy for the School can be formulated.

In summary, this project has been an extremely worthwhile investigation and there is ample evidence to support this notion, not only from student evaluations but also from the members of staff. It was widely agreed by staff at Brunel that those who attended the Pre-Summit Events wished that their non-attending colleagues had actually attended this event. Another noteworthy finding was that staff members were quite willing to participate and share their 'stories'. A 'positive' ending to a 'positive' beginning.

References

Cooperrider, D.L. Whitney, D., & Stavros, J.M. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: The first in a series of AI workbooks for leaders of change*. Crown Custom Publishing, Inc: Brunswick, OH.