Giving students a voice to achieve positive change: Using appreciative inquiry to maximize student engagement

Paul MacLeod

Introduction

Student engagement is an area of concern for many educators, as students with higher levels of engagement and motivation tend to learn more than their less-motivated or engaged peers (Schreiner, 2007). Research into strengths-based approaches shows that people working from their strengths display higher levels of motivation, confidence, satisfaction and competence and that they tend to learn and retain information more easily (Rath, 2007; Clifton & Harter 2003; Linley & Harrington, 2006, Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In addition, when teachers are both socially supportive and intellectually demanding students tend to be more engaged and positive about their own learning (Stipek, 2002, Turner, Meyer, Cox, DiCintio & Thomas, 1998).

Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based approach that encourages participants to share their peak experiences in order to extract the common themes. Those themes are then used to develop strategies to replicate or build upon the peak experience in the current context (Cooperider and Whitney, 2001, Watkins and Mohr, 2001). Although originally an organizational change approach, AI is now widely used in education. The literature indicates that using AI approaches in the classroom leads to enhanced student engagement, participation and achievement (Yballe & O’Connor, 2000, AI Commons, nd.)

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Background of the Participants

This study is an ongoing exploration of the efficacy of the AI approach in enhancing student learning with high intermediate language learners at the College of the North Atlantic-Qatar. In general, the learners at the College of the North Atlantic are similar to other tertiary students in the Arabian Gulf. They have progressed through a K-12 system in the throes of constant reform. The emphasis in their prior schooling was memorization to pass examinations. The initial Rand report for the Qatari government “found an educational system that will be familiar to many Arab region scholars: a rigid curriculum emphasizing rote learning, hierarchical institutions with unclear goals, lack of incentives or accountability, and misallocated resources” (Rand, 2006, p. 4-8). As a result, students are often weak in English and Arabic language skills. Further, they are frequently completely unprepared for the foreign methods that their English teachers use to try to ready them for studying in an English medium of instruction academic program (MacLeod, 2007; Rostrom, 2009). To further exacerbate the difficulties for students and teachers, students often do not choose their own majors so they are not always willing to work hard to prepare to study.

Starting in June 2011, the author has utilized an AI approach with his own students each semester. To date, this study has involved six separate groups of students with approximately 100 students being involved.

Objectives:

1. Move students from the common deficit-based, teacher-dependent mind-set to a more self-reliant approach focused on using their strengths to learn more effectively.
2. Use a positive discourse to foster improved student attitudes, increase interaction between students and increase students’ engagement with their learning.
3. Facilitate students’ adopting a set of appreciative agreements, or commitments around what they would do individually and collectively, as a class to achieve their goals.

Methods:

participants used the following AI process:

A. Discovery- participants follow an interview guide (a structured interview format) with a partner to explore their best learning experiences and to explore three wishes to make their learning experience ideal. This best learning experience does not need to have been at CNAQ or even in a classroom at all. In fact, one the learning experiences that resonated with the individual involved and the group was his description of learning how to ride a horse.

Teacher: “So when you got on the horse for the first time, what happened?”

Student: “I fell off.”

Teacher “…and then…”

Student: “I got back on.”

Several more exchanges took place in which the student recounted his frustration with falling off and his determination to ride the horse. His story culminated in triumph as after a long struggle he learned to ride.

Participants make a list of three wishes indicating any three changes they would make to create their ideal learning environment.

At the end of the discovery phase participants share their partner’s stories (and their own vision of an ideal class or college) and three wishes with the group.

B. Dream- After sharing each other’s stories, and wishes, participants work in groups to extract meaningful patterns or themes (related to successful learning) from the stories.

Examples of the themes

• Working together we will succeed!
• The people in the Independent Learning Centre (ILC) help me to understand my work
• I am excited when the teacher lets us choose what to work on
• My parents will be happy when I finish 1090 and start my program
• Getting high grades makes me happy!
• I realize that at College I am responsible!

Examples of 3 Wishes
• Cancel CAEL (Canadian Academic English Language Assessment)
• More online work—use technology, work from home
• Less assessment
• Schedule – better for individual students
• Fewer students in class
• Comfortable temperature in class
• No afternoon classes

C. Design — Using the data from the Dream phase, participants, in concert with the facilitator, developed an individual plan to maximize their learning and promulgated a series of agreements governing group behavior.

I understand that passing FL 1090 and getting the required score on the CAEL exam is a difficult challenge and I am going to use the themes from our class discussion to help me succeed.

Please see Appendix A for a sample of the Student behavior plan

Class Agreements (Class Rules Mutually Negotiated -Based on Themes)
• Respect!
  Respect means: showing up on time, bringing necessary materials, trying one's best to learn, helping your classmates, listening when others are talking, not using phones unless absolutely necessary.

D. Destiny: Changes discussed and developed in the Design phase were implemented. The students took steps to implement their themes and as an example the instructor responded to the three wishes.

E. Instructor Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 Wishes</th>
<th>Response -Instructor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cancel CAEL</td>
<td>Maybe in future for now you have to live with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More online work—use technology, work from home</td>
<td>I will use more, and more interesting technologies in lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less assessment</td>
<td>I cannot change the number of assessments, but I will ensure that you are prepared for them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schedule – better for individual students</td>
<td>I have limited ability to change the schedule, but I am trying to get our late afternoon class changed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer students</td>
<td>Sorry, the registrar at the College determines the number of SS per class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable temperature in class</td>
<td>I have asked facilities AGAIN to adjust the temperature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No afternoon classes</td>
<td>I have limited ability to change the schedule, but I am trying to get our late afternoon class changed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants gave feedback on the AI approach. Students took part in as short semi-structured interview to determine if the AI approach had improved their learning and if so how.

Results:
All students showed renewed commitment and enthusiasm for the class. In general, the AI approach resulted in increased quality and quantity of participation, increased attendance and
overall a more positive attitude from students. Participants reported that the process made them feel more positive, confident and interested in learning. These results are consistent with the facilitator's observations and the results reported in the literature.

Conclusions and suggestions for further research:
Given the non-random sample of participants this study cannot be said to be generalizable to EFL students in Qatar or elsewhere. However, given the positive results experienced by the investigator and the students involved. The investigator plans to continue to conduct and document small-scale case studies. It would be useful to do a wide-scale study comparing the attitudes and results of students taught in a traditional approach with those of a group taught using an AI approach.

References
- AI Commons (nd). Available at http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/
Appendix A

Individual Agreement

I ____________________, ID #________________ hereby agree that I am going to do the following actions in order to increase my learning and my class mates learning in FL 1090 Section ___.

I will attend class on time ____ %
I will do the assigned work ____%.
I will help my classmates whenever possible.
I will not disturb the class with off-topic conversations
I will not play with my phone or answer my phone in class.
I will study outside of the class for _______hours per week.
I plan to visit the Independent Learning Centre for help with my ___________ which is my weakest skill.
If I have problem which requires me to miss a class, I will telephone, text or email Mr MacLeod, Mob. 5506-3519 paul.macleod@cna-qatar.edu.qa ahead of time.