



CMA Centre for Strategic Change and Performance Management
Segal Graduate School of Business
Simon Fraser University

September 2007

Case Study

***The
Appreciative
Inquiry into
Learning
at the
Metropolitan
School District:
Unleashing a Culture
of Creative
Engagement***

Table of Contents

The Story....	1
Project Scope	1
AI Application	1
Short Term Outcomes	3
Long Term Outcomes	4
Summary of Learnings	5
References	6

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An abridged, earlier version of this case appears in The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook, 2nd Edition

This case description assumes the reader is familiar with Appreciative Inquiry and the 4-D process.
For more information on Appreciative Inquiry follow the links at www.gervasebushe.ca

The support of the BC Ministry of Education in funding this research is gratefully acknowledged.

The Story

A new superintendent and a new school board in the Metropolitan School District wanted to find a way to change the discourse that emphasized labor discord, teacher-employer conflict, and a government that was strongly focused on measuring student achievement. They wanted, instead, to emphasize collaborative learning communities and make the experience of the individual learner the centre of the discourse. The Superintendent facilitated a consensus inside the “District Planning Group” (approximately 40 people representing all stakeholder groups) to involve everyone in the District in an inquiry into “What Do We Know About Learning”. Though he had no experience with appreciative inquiry (AI), the Superintendent suspected it was the right method for this inquiry. His image of AI was that of conventional action research with a positive focus. A senior District Level administrator was given responsibility for a \$720,000 budget, and two teachers were appointed to be District AI Consultants. All three attended one of my two-day courses on AI. After the course I was asked to consult on the project. We designed an AI that eventually involved 21 schools in eight sites in the first three phases of the 4-D model between January and April 2006, including two-day AI Summits for each site. Destiny continues into 2007.

Project Scope

Eighteen secondary schools (grades 8-12), 88 elementary schools, and seven adult learning centers were invited to apply to be part of the learning inquiry. Members of the District Management Team, the elementary and secondary school teachers’ unions, and the Internal AI staff chose eight out of 20 or so applications. Some of these were from a single high school. A few were combined elementary and high school submissions. One was an adult learning centre, and two combined all three types of institutions in common geographical areas. At the District level, the Associate Superintendent responsible for the site was the District Sponsor, and a principal at the site was made the Site Sponsor. I consulted extensively with the District AI team, trained the site teams, and worked with the Superintendent and Associates. In consultation with the district team and district sponsors, I designed the intervention. The District AI team managed the entire process and facilitated the summits.

Each site had one teacher who was given release time to be the site AI coordinator/ change agent. To support him/her, each site created an AI team that included administrators, teachers, students, and, in some cases, parents and school support staff. The two District AI

Consultants worked with each site. Money was provided for teacher release time to attend team meetings, for interviews, and for attending the summit.

AI Application

Soon after being chosen, AI site teams of 6-10 members were formed, and they attended a two-day training course. During the training they were taught the philosophy of AI, the design of this inquiry, and their tasks and roles. In addition, they participated in an AI process to develop the two Affirmative Questions that would guide every inquiry in the District. Just before noon of the second day, members of the District Planning Group came to the training and, in the midst of site teams busily creating Design Proposals for the affirmative questions, these DPC members were given a short introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. All proposals were put on the wall and explained, and then everyone (approximately 100 people) used sticky dots to indicate their preferences. The 20 DPC members then fish bowled a decision-making meeting, led by the Superintendent, and chose the two affirmative questions. This sponsorship process was widely seen as innovative, transparent, energizing and empowering. The Superintendent later described it as a high-point in his career. The AI process got off the ground with a lot of positive energy.

Each site was encouraged to create one or two local affirmative questions and communicate this to the District AI team who crafted the AI interview guide for each site. Assuming there would be uneven levels of enthusiasm and perhaps some cynicism towards the inquiry, the site teams were coached to create a stakeholder map and target high status individuals in each important sub-group to interview. Interviewees were asked for 4 or 5 stories of peak learning experiences, and the interviewer would choose the “best” one to write up later and give this to the site coordinator. Each interviewee was asked if they would be willing to interview two other people as well as attend the Summit. I hoped this “viral interviewing strategy” would generate a large number of stories, create interest and enthusiasm in the AI process, and in itself begin changing the discourse towards the hoped for direction in each site. Approximately 3 weeks before each AI Summit (Ludema, et. al. 2003) the site team met for a series of *synergenesis* meetings, a technique for working with appreciative interview data (Bushe, 1995; 2007). At these meetings the stories were used as a catalyst for generating answers for each affirmative question. The output of these synergenesis sessions was captured and a “Discovery Document” created that was circulated throughout the site. The effort put into these

sessions, and the resulting quality, varied considerably.

The site sponsor together with the AI team decided on whom to invite to the Summit. With a few exceptions, summit participants had also participated in interviews. Summits, held in March and April, varied considerably in composition. Those with multiple schools tended to be more administrator heavy, and the ratio of teachers varied for a variety of reasons. There was always a fair percentage (approximately 20%) of students. There were a few parents and the occasional board member or union official. The District Sponsors varied in how much time they spent at the summits, though all were on hand for the final half day. The Superintendent made an inspirational speech at each summit. Summit size averaged around 80, with some as small as 50 and some as large as 100.

Summit design evolved over the first three summits and from the fourth on the following process was used. All Summit participants were asked to read the Discovery Documents before attending. The affirmative topic for each summit was chosen by each site, and the Dream and Design phases during the summit were focused on it. Upon entering, people began by milling about and describing what most excited them about their experience during the Discovery phase. They were then deliberately seated at tables to maximize a diversity of views.

Discussion about what was learned during the Discovery Phase in relation to the affirmative topic occurred in the small groups and then in the large group. About an hour before lunch, participants were taken into the Dream phase using guided imagination. At the same small groups they described their individual dreams, and the groups pulled out common themes. Over lunch these groups devised skits to act out their dream for the rest of the participants. After the skits were presented, the large group discussed the main themes coming out of the skits. These were captured and consolidated into 10-14 dream themes. Participants were invited to choose one theme to work on, and each small group was given art materials to produce a visual image that captured their part of the collective dream. These were assembled on a large sheet of butcher paper along a wall, with an aboriginal “dream catcher” drawn in the centre. Describing each part and assembling the “Collective Dream” ended the first day.

Afterwards, the District AI team met with the site team to devise the “organizing model” that would be used for Design. This was the 8 to 12 categories that captured all the key elements required for a design appropriate to the affirmative topic. For example, one site that combined all 3 types of institutions had the affirmative topic “Site Collaboration to Enrich Success through Relationships and

Engagement". Their organizing model included grade 7/8 transition, secondary/ adult transition, education partnerships; physical facilities, school schedules and organization; diversity of programming and instruction; community/ parent engagement, connections and partnerships; experiential learning; and celebrating varieties of success. After the usual check in, the second day began with the site team laying out the organizing model, explaining their rationale for it, and adjusting it according to comments from participants.

Participants were then asked to go to the element of the organizing model they wanted to build a design statement for. Design statements were described using the metaphor of blueprints for building a house: each design statement described, in as much detail as possible and in the present tense, what a room looks like in the ideal house. The first drafts of Design Statements were posted and participants were given post-it notes and asked to provide feedback. The teams reviewed the feedback and then rewrote their Design Statements and all of them were then read out.

The Destiny phase commenced by describing improvisational style used in this AI (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), contrasting that with the typical implementation style of change. Participants were asked to go to the Design

Statement they wanted to contribute to making a reality. The resulting groups were asked to discuss and note what needed to happen for each design to come into being, and then each person was given 5X7" cards and asked to write down what they were personally willing to do to make something happen. A "Roadmap to the Future" made of butcher paper was taped to a wall and people attached their 5X7" cards at the point in time where they aimed to complete their commitments. Participants milled around and read the cards on the roadmap, and the Summit ended with the variety of sponsors in the room (usually 3-5) each describing their experience of the summit and what they were personally committing to do in the coming months. The expectation was that the Dream Mural would be taken back to the school and put on display and that the Roadmap would be typed up and distributed.

Short Term Outcomes

In most sites the process engendered a heightened sense of community, empowerment and informal, distributed leadership. Five key themes about "what do we know about learning" emerged from all the inquiries:

- Create caring, supportive relationships
- Demonstrate passion in teaching

- Offer experiential and out of classroom learning opportunities
- Address diverse learning styles
- Provide flexibility and choice

A variety of projects and processes related to these were proposed. In September of 2006 the District committed approximately \$150,000 in its 2006-2007 budget to support these initiatives and almost \$400,000 for new Appreciative Inquiries into learning. Later revenue shortfalls reduced the money for new inquiries.

In most sites, teachers and administrators commented on the important contribution that students' voices made to the summit. A common observation was that the students kept the adults honest. Some opened doors that the adults might have left closed. A few had innovative ideas. Increased opportunities for student leadership were developed at many of the sites.

As part of a study of this process, structured observations and surveys were completed at each summit. Survey ratings indicate the summits created high levels of optimism and hope across sites. The lowest score any site averaged on any of the questions in Table 1 was 4.07 out of 5.

Most of the design statements were long run in nature and few could be implemented by the time the summer recess began.

Table1 Average Ratings from all Summit Participants

I am confident that good things are going to happen as a result of this Summit.	4.24
I am excited by all of the potential and opportunity that I see to make positive changes	4.26
At this stage, I feel positive about the future because of my participation in the Appreciative Inquiry process	4.30
(5 = strongly agree)	

The uneven levels of leadership, site engagement, and site team competence led me and others to expect not all sites would be successful. I expected the two month summer break to reduce momentum for change considerably. At the end of the school year predictions were made about the level of success expected at each site. None were expected to be transformational.

Long Term Outcomes¹

Follow up interviews were conducted at the sites and with District personnel in the spring of 2007. Contrary to predictions, of the eight sites that participated in the Appreciative Inquiry, half showed convincing evidence of transformational change in areas related to student learning. Examples of transformation include redefining the role of teachers in the lives of students, breaking down boundaries between

¹ A fuller report exploring these findings in more detail, with a review of the actual data and statistical analysis, is available from the author.

elementary and secondary schools to the point where they are coordinating curriculum, a complete revamping of the structure of grade eight, revolutionary changes in the use of technology in an elementary school and a complete change in the encouragement of student leadership throughout all grades in a secondary school.

Two sites showed evidence of positive incremental change. These were sites where changes were less dramatic, and are best described as a continuation of changes that were already in progress. Two sites showed not much change at all.

Finding a 50% transformational success rate was way beyond expectations. This distribution of outcomes allowed for some interesting findings in sorting out what contributes to transformational effects of appreciative inquiry.

The main findings are that transformational sites had passionate leadership from either administrators or respected teachers and a widely shared concern or issue that the Appreciative Inquiry addressed.

In both incremental sites, there were respected leaders but the majority of participants were happy with how things were prior to the summit. There were no pressing issues requiring resolution. In the six change sites there were informal leaders who played significant roles in the success of the effort, and these were absent in the no change sites. As well, there was a relationship between the degree of change and the legitimacy of site coordinators as change agents. In the no change sites there were problems with how the leaders of the effort were perceived by others, causing a lack of engagement. As well, in one of the no change sites, the focus of the inquiry appeared to be too narrow to engage most of the staff.

Exploring the effect of the appreciative inquiry process on degree of change found that how well the Discovery process was managed appeared to make a difference. In particular, the quality of insights generated and communicated seemed tied to transformational change. There was little variability in summit outcomes (all were very positive) and few summit variables seem to account for the differences in degree of change. There is some indication that the level of understanding of the AI process created in the school before the summit, and the degree of support for design statements, might have been related to degree of change.

A few other observations from the qualitative data are worth noting. All transformational sites had affirmative topics that focused on students and learning. Three of the other four sites, on the other hand, had topics that were more general, vague or focused on other ideals.

The results also showed that Appreciative Inquiry was an effective process for increasing student engagement and empowerment where school leadership had this as a priority. Appreciative Inquiry was also a potent process for building relationships between groups if the outcome of the summit supported the emergence of a common identity for all participants.

This latter finding is consistent with the pre-identity, post-identity hypothesis about the effects of appreciative inquiry (Bushe, 2001). In sites where participants came from a variety of groups that did not identify with each others, the transformational effects came from developing a common identity. In those sites were participants already identified with each other, changes were directed entirely toward the effectiveness of the schools.

One result that was important to the School District was the emergence of a number of informal leaders in the various sites who continue to champion change and the AI process. This fits in well with the philosophy

of “distributed leadership” that this school district has embraced and wants more of. Two things seem to account for increased motivation to offer leadership. Consistent with AI theory, some feel encouraged to act on their dreams, so they engage creatively. For others it’s the appreciative philosophy that animates their new or renewed effort to engage.

Furthermore there is evidence that the Appreciative Inquiry process has had transformational effects beyond the sites themselves. There are numerous instances of the District, and individual schools throughout the District, taking an appreciative approach to issues. One of the most transformational is in the engagement of teachers in school planning processes. Prior to the Appreciative Inquiry, the teachers’ unions in this district were against the school planning process and in most schools teachers did not participate. Subsequently, many schools have adopted appreciative approaches to school planning and the union has endorsed teacher participation in those processes.

Summary of Learnings about Using AI

The level of positive affect generated by the inquiry was not a predictor of the level of change. Since all sites showed high levels of positive affect at the completion of the summits, it might be that positive affect is

a necessary but not sufficient condition for transformational change.

In all sites, and particularly post-identity ones, the generation of new, compelling ideas was central to the change process.

To be transformational, the AI process required passionate, committed leadership from people with credibility in the schools. As well, the inquiry needed to address some problem, issue or concern that was widely shared.

The viral interviewing strategy accomplished the three objectives (generate a large number of stories, create interest and enthusiasm in the AI process, and begin changing the discourse in the sites) where it was competently executed.

The stories were extremely powerful in capturing people’s attention and in generating positive dialogue among and between various stakeholders

The synergogenesis process (Bushe, 2007) was a hi-point learning experience for most of those who participated in it and was responsible for many of the ideas that later proved to be transformational. The other source of transformational ideas were the design statements.

It was possible to create a climate that led to positive, energized, design statements without beginning a summit with appreciative interviews.

Appreciative Inquiry at the MSD

That was probably done by using a playful mix of art and theatre during the Dream phase – it is fun, builds bridges, and helps create a climate that supports the rest of the AI process.

Utilizing an “improvisation” as opposed to “implementation” Destiny phase (Bushe & Kassam, 2005), and encouraging individual action, was highly energizing for both followers and leaders.

and site levels, helped ensure critical acts of leadership occurred in the right place at the right time. A lack of appropriate or committed sponsorship was related to a lack of change.

The two-step Design Phase process resulted in quality, detailed, and provocative design statements.

Encouraging the use of ODR’s Sponsor-Change Agent-Target model (Connor, 1993), and helping the internal change agents to build good sponsorship at both the District

A 2 day summit was rushed, but it was just enough time to kick start or amplify collective change processes at the 6 change sites.

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