

English 400: Rhetoric and The Teaching of Writing
Professor Kim Emmons
Case Western Reserve University
November 27, 2005

Research Proposal
Prepared by: Monica Dumitriu

Longitudinal Study:

**"How is Appreciative Inquiry relevant to
the First-Year Composition Classroom?"**

As a co-instructor in the SAGES (Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship) Program during the Fall 2005 semester at Case, I have arrived at several points of inquiry in respect to what teaching aspects may foster effective writing skills for first-year college students. SAGES was formed to support collaborative learning and "knowledge-creation" in the form of philosophical debates, with the ultimate goal to teach first-year students critical thinking and writing skills. My parallel study via our discussions and readings in English 400 has opened new windows of understanding for me into Rhetoric and Composition theory, and I am now specifically curious to explore the collaborative learning elements (in the form of Appreciative Inquiry) between teachers and students in the classroom.

When I learned about the theory of social constructivism, (influenced by Vygotsky's general theory of cognitive development, explaining that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition) I wanted to study further the impact of the social learning process within the classroom (Vygotsky). "Social constructionists believe that individuals and groups draw upon the linguistic resources available within particular cultures and specialized social milieux in order to constitute realities, to each other, and to social institutions" (Enos 675). This social constructionism space becomes for

me the bridge of understanding to other related academic disciplines that shed light on collaborative learning dimensions. As I seek to make an "integrative" argument, I apply the lens of *conceptual blending*, "the mental ability to combine and blend concepts", often deemed "literary and imaginative", a perspective developed by our own Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Case, Mark Turner (Turner 109).

Earlier, in 2000, during my MBA coursework at Weatherhead's Organizational Behavior Department, I had learned about Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a process theory of positive social change (a form of positive psychology) and its many applications to various group and organizational situations. At the heart of the AI theory lays the premise that how questions are formed influences the ultimate destiny of the organizational entity (2 or more people) and that interventions via dialogue are powerful change agents for learning and evolution. AI begins an adventure into positive change and has been described as a paradigm of conscious evolution geared for the realities of a new century (Cooperrider 5). "Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them. In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable... AI involves, in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential" (5).

The Appreciative Inquiry theory was developed by Professors David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva at Case, and it "is a philosophy, it's a methodology for working with organizations, and it's an intervention theory" (Cooperrider 167). "AI is grounded in five principles:

1. **Constructionist Principle.** Our capacity for imagination and creation of images of the future allows for human systems (including organizations) to be altered or reconstructed.
2. **Simultaneity Principle.** Seeds of change are planted in the first question asked. Therefore, inquiry and intervention are interrelated and simultaneous.
3. **Poetic Principle.** Organizations are like an open book or poetry. They are open to multiple interpretations and conclusions.
4. **Anticipatory Principle.** An image of the future precedes the actual change.
5. **Positive Principle.** The more positive the questions, the more positive the data. The more positive the willingness to participate, the more lasting the change process.

Unlike traditional problem-solving, which seeks to identify and analyze problems in systems and relationships, AI seeks to appreciate and dream about their possibilities. Where problem-solving views organizations as a series of problems to be solved, AI looks at organizations as mysteries to be embraced. The Appreciative Inquiry model is constructed in four phases, the "4-D cycle":

1. **Discovery.** Determining what it is about an organization that should be appreciated and valued. What gives life to an organization? What in the organization is exceptional?
2. **Dream.** Envisioning possibilities for the organization's future. What might be?
3. **Design.** What is the ideal? What is the human potential of organizational life?
4. **Destiny.** What we learn in the process of inquiry should lead to sustainable change and growth" (Cooperrider 166-7).

AI also looks at the organization as a "whole system" in which all participants have an important and equal voice in the process of change; this "can do" climate of hope and confidence enables the implementation of sustainable change (Cooperrider 131, 138-9). Hence, some transferable ideas to the SAGES model of teaching writing, include involve the whole classroom, as well as all enabling contributors to the learning process (e.g. Writing Center, etc.) outside the program.

Another AI connection to composition studies is found in the social constructionism view of collaborative learning and its implications for what occurs in the writing class. This view (similar to the work of early process theorists like Peter Elbow and the "teacherless" classroom), implies "a de-centering of the writing class, a balancing of authority between students and teacher, so that students can participate in their own learning through peer editing and writing groups" (Clark 16). Similarly, appreciative inquiry believes in a "decentralized" conversation and meeting of the minds on equal ground where imagination takes flight to envision the best possible future (in our case, the best possible learning scenario). The specific instructions that are often provided in collaborative learning activities are also found in Appreciative Inquiry seminars, where the facilitators will first model an activity before all participants embark upon the challenge of determining procedures for group work or discussing results with the class.

In addition, Appreciative Inquiry also emphasizes the importance of conversation and formal dialogue and advocates the existence of multiple possibilities for interpretation. This focus on *possibilities* may serve as an interesting conceptual tie to composition theories on literary dialogue. "Just as a move in a game creates a space of possible and appropriate countermoves, so in a conversation, each speech act creates a

space of possible and appropriate response speech acts (Macovski 237-8). Another composition/organizational behavior conceptual blending connection may lie in the process of asking questions that is inherent in AI and in composition view of the role of "discourse analysis" emphasizing the basics of communication (critical and literary) (Johnston 2-3).

My personal journey to blend discourse in the composition classroom with appreciative inquiry is semester-long. As the SAGES semester progressed, I purposefully sought opportunities to integrate appreciative inquiry into our classroom in order to foster a positive learning space where students felt inspired to pursue and sustain optimal learning that would result in improved writing skills as time elapsed. Several conscious collaborative approaches were adopted in lectures, particularly for writing instruction periods, where the dialogue with students was led in an appreciative manner, according to AI theory (including positive questions, appreciative listening, storytelling, open space collaborations, etc.) Also, we invited a guest speaker, Dr. David Bright, Visiting Professor at The Center for Business As Agent of World Benefit (BAWB) to speak about appreciative interviewing in preparation for our students' faculty interview projects. I find that one semester's worth of observations, in the capacity of one writing co-instructor, is not sufficient to answer all the integrative theoretical or emerging application questions required to measure the effects and impacts upon the first-year students. Hence, I propose a SAGES-wide longitudinal study that will observe and measure the dimensions of appreciative inquiry within the first-year composition classroom. To be consistent with my own observations, I propose that the study will include one semester's timeframe and that qualitative research be conducted across

multiple or all SAGES classrooms. I believe that there is a strong academic case for applying Appreciative Inquiry in the first-year composition classroom in order to engage and sustain peak learning moments for students. There are many intuitive theoretical connections to composition theory and I hope to illustrate some of the major influences that can shape teaching philosophy for first-year co-instructors.

To prove the relevancy of AI theory to the Composition classroom, I am thinking about what I want to measure and its positive impact relative to the AI intervention. Hence, my teaching values now include aiming for "effective" student writing that includes elements of proficiency, creativity, conscious creation and understanding of cause/effect relationships as a result of using the pertinent classroom teaching tools (i.e. Appreciative Inquiry, collaborative learning, etc.) In order to understand what social mechanisms lead to effective college writing, I would propose to look qualitatively at the micro and macro level influences upon the student/teacher dynamic learning process. On a micro level this includes the actual format of the classroom, seating arrangement (e.g. circle) and most importantly, the nature of the discourse itself. On a macro level this includes the structure of the whole SAGES program within the academic learning environment versus more traditional writing-exclusive approaches (e.g. English 150, etc.) that isolated the reading/writing elements. The relative paradigm of seminar learning (combining multiple elements of learning in different contexts) adopted by the SAGES program within the university makes it possible for students to experiment with their own learning as well. I believe that this opportunity for students to take initiative and be in charge of their own learning, at an individual and possibly group level is most fueled by the appreciative inquiry teaching approach. An AI classroom is one where students and

teachers both engage in positive dialogue and where feedback is grounded in a positive intent to build up the confidence and skills of the learner.

In respect to the social constructivism lens, the social circle of a learner includes many people that direct that person including co-instructors, class peers, other teachers, Writing Center/Peer Editing Crew staff, friends, administrators and all other indirect participants in the learning process. We must recognize all the forces that impact the learner in this model. However, Appreciative Inquiry is a more grounding theoretical approach here because it looks specifically at a dynamic that we can control, mainly the dialogue between the teacher and students and to some extent, the teacher's facilitation of student-student interactions in general class discussion. These are some of the reasons why I believe that the SAGES seminar is a prime subject for the study of AI in the composition classroom.

METHODOLOGY - Action Research and Qualitative Research

In respect to bridging theoretical complementary paradigms, I propose that action research is the most suitable method to apply in a social constructivism model of a first-year composition classroom. Some similarities in the assumptions of *constructivist inquiry*: meaning-making, sensemaking cognitive and emotive activities of stakeholders, focusing on the redistribution of power via information sharing activities by inquirers with and among stakeholders, designing interventions, and creating the conditions which foster taking action on inquiry or evaluation findings, have already been explored in various academic research texts (Reason 124-5).

Action research can also be described as a form of qualitative research that aims to understand more elusive individual subject motivations and behavior rather than

primarily statistical or other quantitative data (Strauss 17-8). As my research proposal aims to shed light on students' motivational changes that consequently impact students' effective writing throughout the semester due to AI-specific interventions, the nature of the "problem" studied is thereby more fluid and best-suited to a qualitative research approach. In respect to methodology, for a process theory like AI, one of the most effective methods of discovery and measurement I would like to conduct qualitative (appreciative) interviews. These would occur at critical intervention points: upon first meeting the students; at the first student-teacher conference; upon returning the first graded paper draft; at mid-semester point; after returning the next major graded paper; after the first individual or group oral presentation; and finally, at the end of the semester.

In addition to this qualitative research, an unbiased panel of graders from the English Department can grade a selected sample of student final papers and compare them to other works throughout the semester, examining the comparable improvements in student writing. These would be compared to a control group SAGES seminar where AI was not purposefully introduced into the classroom. Additionally, a proficiency in-class test can be administered to SAGES students at the end of the semester, to test their critical reading/writing skills within a controlled environment. As AI is a process theory, the time element is very important in measuring before and after effects in improvements in the teaching of writing.

I envision a collaborative multi-disciplinary longitudinal study that would involve researchers from the English Department, Organizational Department and possibly the Cognitive Science area. Researcher teams paired with their counterpart(s) from another discipline would prepare and ask appreciative questions for the students, teachers, and

administrators and other community members (e.g. UCI Institutions) involved in the collaborative SAGES program. This arrangement would foster a multi-dimensional inter-disciplinary balanced view of the learning transformation process inherent in an AI-approach to teaching writing in the first year composition model in SAGES.

Hence, I believe that AI is an important positive change tool for teachers in the first-year composition classroom, as it helps to create and sustain a positive high-performance climate where students feel more creative, supported and innovative, thus enabling them to become more effective writers. The study of strategies to apply AI in the composition classroom can lead to important breakthroughs and discoveries in collaborative learning and the bridging of academic disciplines, between organizational behavior and composition studies and possibly other disciplines (e.g. cognitive sciences, etc.) I think that a longitudinal study of the positive effects of Appreciative Inquiry in the Composition classroom would generate a powerful legacy for the SAGES program and the academic model in undergraduate education and timely and worthy of the monetary and resource investments for Case. Also, the AI approaches may also work well in an advanced composition course where writing and growth are fostered (Shamoon 126).

Ultimately, the application of AI to composition studies might be more global and fundamental in the sense that it addresses the philosophical tenets of discourse in the university. Some compositions sustain that "in the discourse of the university, it might seem, all desires and all knowledges circulate freely" (Alcorn 82).

I conclude on a positive note, feeling personally compelled to continue exploring these inter-disciplinary theoretical connections and desiring that other compositionist scholars and teachers explore and adopt the AI method in the first-year classroom.

Bibliography of Works Consulted/To be consulted

Alcorn, Marshall W. Jr. (2002). *Changing the Subject in English Class: Discourse and the Constructions of Desire*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.

Clark, Irene et al. (2003). "Process." *Concepts in Composition: Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing*. Pp. 1-29.

Clifford, John, and Elizabeth Ervin in Ed. Thomas Kent. (1999). "The Ethics of Process." *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. Pp.179-197.

Cooperrider, David L., Peter F. Sorensen, Jr., Diana Whitney, Therese F. Yaeger, (eds.) (2000). "Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change". *Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization toward a Positive Theory of Change*. Champaign, Illinois: Stipes Publishing L.L.C. Pp. 3-27.

Enos, Theresa (ed.) (1996). *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient times to the Information Age*. New York: Garland Press. Pp. 675-677.

Ewald, Helen Rothschild. (1999) "A Tangled Web of Discourses: On Post-Process Pedagogy and Communicative Interaction." *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*. Ed. Thomas Kent. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. Pp. 116-131.

Fulkerson, Richard. (Fall 2001). "Of Pre- and Post-Process: Reviews and Ruminations." *Composition Studies* 29 (2): pp. 93-120.

Johnston, Barbara. (2002). *Discourse Analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

MacGregor, Jean; Roberta S. Matthews. (1994) The challenge of collaborative learning: Creating bridges between communities, *Change* 26 (5), pp. 52-53.

Macovski, Michael (ed). (1997) "Conversation as Dialogue". *Dialogue and Critical Discourse: Language, Culture, Critical Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp. 237-255.

Poole, Marshall S., Andrew Van de Van, Kevin Dooley, Michael E. Holmes. (2000). "A Typology of Process Theories." *Organizational Change and Innovation Processes: Theory and Methods for Research*, Oxford University Press. Pp. 56-88.

Poole, Marshall S., Andrew Van de Van, Kevin Dooley, Michael E. Holmes. (2000). "Overview: Methods for Process Research." *Organizational Change and Innovation Processes: Theory and Methods for Research*, Oxford University Press. Pp. 91-111.

Reason, Peter, Hillary Bradbury (eds.). (2001). "Engaging Sympathies: Relationships between Action Research and Social Constructivism". *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry & Practice*. London: SAGE Publications. Pp. 124-132.

Shamoon, Linda K. et al. (2000). "Writing as a Means of Social Change." *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook. 126. (CDROM).

Sigman, Stuart J. (ed), (1995). *The Consequentiality of Communication*, Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum. pp. 17-66.

Smith, Craig R. (1998). *Rhetoric and Human Consciousness: A History*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc.

Smith, Robert E., III, (1992) Hymes, Rorty, and the social-rhetorical construction of meaning, *College English* 54 (2), pp. 138-158.

Strauss, Anselm, Juliet Corbin. (1990). "Introduction". *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publication. Pp. 17-32.

Turner, Mark. (1996) *The Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*. New York: Oxford.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.