

## Cultural transposition: Adapting an Appreciative Inquiry to support organisational change in a non-Western context

Nabil Sabra

### Abstract:

This doctoral research study employed an Appreciative Inquiry as a culturally adjusted method for enabling six university educators to develop critical thinking (*ijtihad*)<sup>1</sup> in Yemeni graphic design education.<sup>2</sup> Emanating from a constructivist paradigm, the study recognised the role of sociocultural contexts in knowledge formation. The Appreciative Inquiry was divided into four stages (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny) based on Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) model. The study utilised Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP)<sup>3</sup> based on a traditional cultural construct known as *Halakat Elm* ( حلقات علم, knowledge circles). These circles were shaped by three cultural principles: *wa'adeuk fa'ajbuh* (واذا دعاك فأجبه); *Husn al-Dhann* (حسن الظن); and *sadakat al elm* (صدقة العلم). Key themes were identified through a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA). The outcomes demonstrated that an Appreciative Inquiry developed inside the culturally specific construct of the *Halakat Elm* can serve as an effective, culturally responsive approach for developing co-creative approaches to organisational and pedagogical reform.

### Key words

Appreciative Inquiry, Critical thinking, *Halakat Elm*, *Ijtihad*, Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP).

### Research Questions

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ijtihad* is an Islamic term that relates to a form of critical thinking that includes the heart and soul. Appreciating this expansion from many Western conceptions that tend to focus on rational analysis, Hashim and Hussein (2003) suggest that *ijtihad* is better suited as a critical thinking conceptual model in Islamic education.

<sup>2</sup> The project was granted ethics approval (21/129) on July 8, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> A Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) operates online. Here, individuals engage in instruction-based learning or group discussions within a specific domain, forming social structures to facilitate knowledge sharing and creation (Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

How might approaches be developed to enhance *ijtihad* in undergraduate graphic design students in Yemen?

### **Research Objectives**

Given the current situation, where critical thinking does not hold a significant position in Yemeni postgraduate education (Al-Rashdan, 2009; Muthanna & Karaman, 2014; Sabra, 2022), the objectives of the study were to:

1. Support the examination of *ijtihad* in relation to graphic design education.
2. Work with Yemeni teachers to identify and develop learning approaches that might enhance *ijtihad* in their teaching.

### **Research Design**

In this research, I utilised a qualitative research approach that highlighted the subjective nature of knowledge creation within a sociocultural context (Allen, 1994; Boyland, 2019; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Zuriff, 1998). This approach enabled the study to appreciate the participants' viewpoints and experiences, acknowledging the intricacies of their professional and cultural settings.

### **Appreciative Inquiry as a research methodology**

Appreciative Inquiry is a theory, methodology, and process of organisational and social change that grew out of concerns with action research's remoteness (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Its applications are often context-sensitive (Cram, 2010; Elliot, 1999) and promote change by avoiding deficit-based approaches (Sullivan, 2004).

In the study, Appreciative Inquiry was fundamental to fostering positive, realistic change, especially given the Yemeni war and resulting human and infrastructural challenges.

### **The *Halakat Elm***

The Appreciative Inquiry utilised a *Halakat Elm* (a traditional Islamic knowledge circle) for establishing a VCoP that enabled collective thinking in a co-creational space.<sup>4</sup> Inside a *Halakat Elm*, learners engage in collaborative discussions and knowledge exchange.

As a researcher within the *Halakat Elm*, I acted as a *mudrik* (one who exercises perceptive consciousness), facilitating discussions without steering outcomes. This

---

<sup>4</sup> These spaces were supported by platforms like Zoom and Miro. As an interactive online workspace, Miro was used during VCoP sessions to document our progress, mind-map ideas, and record written input.

approach allowed for the organic development of ideas, while outside the circle I conducted data analysis and reflection that resourced subsequent discussions.

### **Cultural Values and Appreciative Inquiry**

The *Halakat Elm* was shaped by three Islamic principles that tailored Appreciative Inquiry to better suit the Yemeni context.

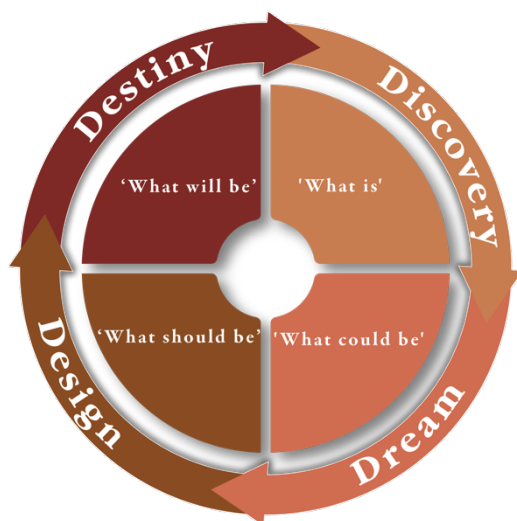
The first principle, *حسن الظن Husn al-Dhann* (adopting an appreciative outlook), enhances trust and social cohesion through positive thinking (Rusydi, 2012). This concept aligned with Appreciative Inquiry's emphasis on cultivating positive relationships and encouraging constructive dialogue (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The second Islamic principle, *صدقة العلم Sadakat al Elm* (the practice of knowledge charity), relates to the ethical responsibility to disseminate knowledge for the common good. This principle discourages withholding information and advocates for generosity in sharing insights (Awang et al., 2017).

The third principle, *واذا دعاك فأجبه Wa'adeuk Fa'ajbuh* (respond to invitations), instilled a sense of dedication in participants, who remained engaged despite challenges such as power outages and time zone differences. This moral obligation nurtured unity and a strong sense of purpose throughout the study.

### **The structure of the study**

The study was organised into four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Figure 1).



*Figure 1* An overview of how the research was structured inside Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) stages of an Appreciative Inquiry.

The Discovery stage diverged from traditional Appreciative Inquiry methods, which typically involve in-person group collaboration. Instead, individual interviews were conducted, due to my inability to return to Yemen. Because logistical constraints prevented participants from meeting in person, the main themes identified from these interviews served as the foundation for Stage 2 (Dream). Here participants contemplated *ijtihad* and considered novel approaches to incorporate it into teaching. Stage 3 (Design) concentrated on crafting strategies to integrate *ijtihad* into learning environments. In Stage 4 (Destiny), participants developed plans to implement these strategies, creating proposals aimed at enhancing critical thinking within Yemeni graphic design education.

## Words of wisdom

Appreciative Inquiry necessitated an understanding of a specific cultural context. By modifying it to fit the *Halakat Elm* and integrating essential Islamic tenets, this approach proved successful, despite obstacles such as conflict and unstable infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> Discussions were conducted in Arabic, the native tongue of the participants. This necessitated meticulous interpretation, as numerous Yemeni concepts are challenging to accurately convey in English.

## Conclusion

Appreciative Inquiry's focus is on "stimulating positive change by encouraging participants to tell stories about the positive/good achievements of the organization" (Ali et al., 2020, p. 3487).

Employing an Appreciative Inquiry shifted my perception from merely understanding and positioning ideas to presenting scholarship as a service that supports others in leveraging their insights to design meaningful futures. This endeavour has transformed my outlook on educational development and the potential of culturally sensitive research design.

---

<sup>5</sup> For more discussion, see Khaled (2024).

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Welby Ings, who provided insights and feedback on this article, and to Elwyn Sheehan for proofreading the text.


## References

- Al-Rashdan, A. A. (2009). Higher education in the Arab world: Hopes and challenges. *Arab Insight*, 2(6), 77–90.
- Ali, I., Shaikh, G. M., Channa, M. A., Brohi, M. A., & Khuwaja, S. (2020). To what extent can appreciative inquiry be a substitute/alternative or perhaps complementary to problem-centric approaches? A paradox. *International Journal of Disaster Recovery and Business Continuity*, 11(3), 3485–3496.
- Allen, J. A. (1994). The constructivist paradigm: Values and ethics. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 8(1–2), 31–54. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v08n01\\_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v08n01_03)
- Awang, S. A., Muhammad, F., Borhan, J. T., & Mohamad, M. T. (2017). The concept of charity in Islam: An analysis on the verses of Quran and hadith. *Jurnal Usuluddin*, 45(1), 141–172.
- Boyland, J. R. (2019). A social constructivist approach to the gathering of empirical data. *Australian Counselling Research Journal*, 13(2), 30–34.
- Cooperrider, D. L., & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. W. Woodman and W. A. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol 1., pp. 129–169).
- Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Cram, F. (2010). Appreciative inquiry. *MAI Review*, 3. <https://www.journal.mai.ac.nz/maireview/article/846>
- Elliot, C. (1999). *Locating the energy to change: An introduction to appreciative inquiry*. International Institute for Sustainable Development.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 104–117). Sage.
- Hashim, R., & Hussein, S. (2003). The teaching of thinking in Malaysia. International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Khaled, F. (2024). A war of attrition: Higher education in Yemen. *Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies; Yemen Peace Forum*. <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/22091>

- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1995). *Designing qualitative research*. Cambridge University Press.
- Muthanna, A., & Karaman, A. (2014). Higher education challenges in Yemen: Discourses on English teacher education. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 37, 40–47. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.IJEDUDEV.2014.02.002>
- Rusydi, A. (2012). Husn al-zhann: The concept of positive thinking in Islamic psychology perspective and its benefit on mental health. *Proyeksi*, 7(1), 1–31. <http://doi.org/10.30659/jp.7.1.1-31>
- Sabra, N. (2022). Exploring critical thinking in graphic design education in Yemen (M. Mortensen Steagall, Trans.). *The Geminis Journal*, 13(3), 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.53450/2179-1465.RG.2022v13i3p35-43>
- Sullivan, M. (2004). The promise of appreciative inquiry in library organizations. *Library Trends*, 53(1), 218–229.
- Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). *Introduction to communities of practice: A brief overview of the concept and its uses*. <https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>
- Zuriff, G. (1998). Against metaphysical social constructionism in psychology. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 26(1/2), 5–28.



## **Short Bio**

Nabil Sabra  is the founder of the [MENA student mentoring programme](#) at AUT. He has recently submitted his PhD at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). The study is interdisciplinary (positioned between graphic design and education) and is a manifestation of his concerns with enhancing learning environments, so they embrace deeper levels of student reflection and personal relevance.