



Through Others' Eyes: Reflections of a Tertiary Teacher

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the impact that the process of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has had on my professional teaching practice and the deep analysis of practice that occurred through the process. The two domains explored within the parameters of AI in this paper are (a) reflections on my teaching practice with students in my class, and (b) a research project conducted with a colleague. In both of these situations there is the opportunity to consider the deeper and heightened awareness that has been revealed through the process of inquiry that AI offers. A dominant theme that has emerged is the need for dynamic teaching strategies as this illuminates and empowers all members of the learning community alongside the power of reflection as a tool.

Using the Appreciative Inquiry methodology in relation to my teaching in a university has allowed me the space to chart the progress, journey and pathway of my teaching over a semester in a deliberate and thoughtful manner. The AI approach has been a way of looking more closely at my practices, philosophy and values.

When inquiry touches issues intimately connected to one's life, learning becomes all-important, as important as practicing their art is to committed musicians, painters, or poets. Like these endeavours, narrative curricula highlight the importance of the moment – the experience of the moment and what happens in the encounters with people and things, moment by moment.

(Conle, 2003, p.13)

I use the ponga frond as a metaphor to illustrate more fully my role in promoting and fostering relationships with students and teaching colleagues with an educational focus. I see the curved frond containing and protecting the series of smaller fronds within a system, which relates very closely to the vision I have for my role as an educator. I perceive myself as the larger frond with the smaller fronds representing the groupings of students that naturally form within a classroom setting. The circular nature of the frond represents the shared social settings and the connectivity between the different parts of the frond. Links can be found between the frond metaphor and the wider educational milieu. The complexity of these systems within systems replicates Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework that is widely accepted within a socially constructed educational ethos. For example, it underpins the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). These elaborate patterns, that bear a close resemblance to each other, can be

likened to the relationship between teacher and teacher, and teacher and students. They can also illustrate connectivity and the elaborate processes that occur when there is a shared dialogue, a shared vision, and shared experience between all the parts.

The ponga may also represent new life or an energy. This has powerful similarities to the AI philosophy. For example, Cooperrider, Whitney and Stravos (2005) suggest that each organisation and its members have strengths that work towards giving the group 'life' and a sense of purpose for the future. Markove and Holland (2005) also state that AI 'is based on the assumption that every living system has an untapped richness of positive and inspiring stories, a positive core' (p. 2).

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: EVALUATING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Appreciative Inquiry has emerged as a powerful 'philosophy in action' over the last twenty years. David Cooperrider and his mentor Suresh Srivastva discovered the merits of considering the most effective, 'life-giving forces' that exist in an organisation (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

The AI process has been adapted from its initial intention of understanding and empowering social-organisational structures to that of understanding and empowering an individual in this study; a relatively new phenomenon (Bushe, 1999). As an agent of change, the process of AI historically helped identify and then develop constructs and possibilities around what was working in an organisation, building and enhancing this in measurable ways rather than a deficit model of trying to fix the problem. The assumption with this is that there is merit at looking at the potential and possibilities rather than the limitations and problems (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006).

Appreciative Inquiry's key concepts and roots are located within a socio-rationalist theory (Gergen, 1982, 1994, cited in Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006) where organisations are seen to be socially constructed. Reality is seen as a constantly shifting and changing concept. This theory suggests that organisations are socially constructed with a focus on change: the future as the reality, rather than looking to the past. Doveston and Keenaghan sought to use AI principles and processes to improve the social dynamics in a class with a project (Growing Talent For Inclusion), focusing on students with a range of additional educational needs. Findings showed an improvement in working relationships between students and an enhancement in recognising and responding to strengths within the group. This is a refreshing change from the deficit model that tends to be used within this teaching model and another example of the transformative power of the AI philosophy for diverse educational groups.

Watkins and Mohr (2001) state that AI must be viewed as more than a 'tool, technique, or intervention' (p. 21) and instead consider AI in a more system-wide approach, where it is the 'cooperative search for the best in people, their organisations, and the world around ... [In this way,] AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, p. 10).

APPLYING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY TO MY OWN TEACHING PRACTICE

The ideas above resonate strongly with me and encapsulate what I wish to gain by applying the principles of AI to my own teaching in a tertiary institution: 'growing' in the direction of that which is positive, fulfilling and potentially leads to greater connections. This would be the realisation of many professional and personal dreams.

It is exciting to consider the potential of this research method as a possible alternative to the action research model. 'Appreciative Inquiry represents a viable complement to conventional forms of action-research ... through our assumptions and choice of method we largely create the world we later discover' (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 29). While both action research and AI share some similarities in the areas of processes and the possible outcomes, with traditional action research the focus may be on problem identification and solutions. In contrast, the application of AI processes and values may establish and enrich the key components or strengths that are already there. There is still 'action' taking place but it can be more energetically focussed through an inherent desire for change rather than a search for solutions (Doveston & Keenaghan, 2006).

As a lecturer in early childhood education in a School of Education within a university, I have many roles within the profession: teacher, mentor, colleague, researcher, friend, advisor and a post-graduate tertiary student. These roles embody key relationships that have the potential to be transformative. The nature of the discourse within the teaching-learning relationship remains pivotal to the process of transformation and future educational experiences and possibilities. In this sense 'the power of Appreciative Inquiry is its ability to draw participants into the process of describing and speculating from actual stories' (Giles & Alderson, 2004, p. 5). These stories may be from any participants in the learning teaching process. How the stories are honoured, acknowledged, celebrated and experienced by participants is critical to the transformative possibilities.

THE APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY CYCLE

The four phases of AI form a cycle whereby it can be used as a tool for encouraging individuals and groups to 'be the best they can be' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999). The four phases of AI are: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny. In Discovery, all members are part of the process of identifying the strengths and positive aspects of current practice. Dream involves envisioning and conceiving the possibilities for the key questions that arise from the previous process or phase. The Design phase involves developing 'propositions' (structured goals) that appear possible and attainable through the lens of AI principles. Destiny is the realising and strengthening of these propositions in a positive and fulfilling manner (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000).

These four phases follow on from each other. Here, two of these phases will be applied to my own teaching in the belief that profound connections can be found through a positive vision. This in turn may manifest as positive action (Yballe & O'Connor, 2000). Only two phases from the model have been chosen at this stage of the journey: Discovery and Design. The Discovery phase was chosen because of its inherent power to reveal that which has not been

revealed using simply an AI lens. The second, the Design phase, is chosen because the revelations gifted to me as an educator have now opened up new potentials and possibilities for consideration in the form of 'propositions'.

To be able to look at the personal within the professional in education is an empowering tool. It legitimises and acknowledges the power of the 'human heart' within the teaching profession (Palmer, 1998). The two phases give opportunities to look more closely at my teaching practice and link the phases to specific experiences where I both felt some 'magic' or bonding beyond the superficial and where further enlightenment or enhancement may be possible. Leaving the Dream and Destiny phases until a later stage in my ever evolving process of self reflection allows for new directions and revelations and gives testament to the evolving and flexible nature to the AI principles and phases.

The discovery stage will identify markers of best practice as evidenced by my own reflections and those of my students, informally gained through an invitation to contribute anonymously to this appraisal. I have also invited a colleague to share insights about our experience of conducting a co-research project (that revealed itself to be transformative) and our co-teaching together on a year one paper. The power of authentic discovery through the AI process can result in a 'rich mapping of the positive core' and 'exemplary actions, collective wisdom' and 'the emergence of unplanned changes well before implementation' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 6).

The Design phase has led to 'propositions' that consider Palmer's six 'paradoxical tensions' (Palmer, 1998) as a method of analysis of and reflection on my teaching practice. These tensions move away from traditional measures of analysis and seek to guide, inform and give 'life' to teaching and learning spaces that we collectively create with our students. Palmer considers the concept of 'space' to be all the factors that combine to create a teaching and learning experience: the physical environment, the subject matter, the classroom dynamics and relationships. and the classroom contract that is agreed to by all members. The six paradoxical tensions, as used by Palmer (1998, p.74) when he designs a classroom session, are:

1. The space should be 'bounded and open'.
2. The space should be hospitable and 'charged'.
3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.
4. The space should honour the 'little' stories of the students and the 'big' stories of the disciplines and tradition.
5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of the community.
6. The space should welcome both silence and speech.

The tensions refer to the potential dichotomy of teaching experiences that may be 'either-or' or 'somewhere in between' in terms of what ensues when a group of people gather to learn and teach. It suggests the unpredictable nature of the classroom environment and how there needs to be awareness of this and a readiness for this unpredictability.

EXPERIENCE A

I chose a tutorial group of students this semester to explore the AI process and shared with them my wish to identify those moments where a new level of connectedness may be revealed. The motivation here is to enhance the lived experience between myself and my students and move beyond the more traditional markers of identifying what makes a good teacher. This moves towards a more holistic approach. I am reminded of Palmer's (1998) 'anatomy of fear' in teaching and how, in our teaching, we can pull back each layer of fear to reveal yet another form of fear we have to face so that this multi-layered complexity can actually be healthy and open up a 'capacity for connectedness' (p.39). For the purpose of this study, I chose to take a colourful cardboard 'posting' box to the tutorial class with sheets of paper and invited students to contribute anonymous feedback by 'posting' their informal, spontaneous and self-directed feedback to me about any aspect of the paper and my teaching.

From the feedback gathered from the students, and a colleague, there appears to be a connection between AI and Parker's paradoxical tensions which can possibly lead to a heightened awareness and fostering of renewed commitments. Formed in an affirmative way these 'propositions' offer possibilities, they challenge and provoke me, and give new vigour to my teaching practice. Thinking in these new ways can only empower me, leading to positive growth.

The surprise, shock and appreciation was perceptible as the students reflected this in their feedback through the box:

Absolutely love presentation of your class. You offered great fun and positive learning experiences for us. I never had enough of the activities you set up for us. You also showed respect for other cultures. I really appreciate that. Thank you, all the best.

Other students' comments reflected my teaching strengths in the following examples:

Nicky is a passionate teacher who uses many examples to illustrate what she is discussing.

Nicky, I enjoy coming to Curriculum as you lighten us up with your bright, happy nature. I like the way you put your experiences into our learning. Keep up the good work.

I find it very encouraging that you are so enthusiastic and passionate.

Nicky is really cool, her enthusiasm is reflected on me immediately – nothing I can say but thankyou.

Nicky really listens to us, takes time to answer our questions and creates a great atmosphere.

I like the way Nicky gives real life examples which makes the lectures more interesting.

It is heartening to read these messages that endorse and acknowledge my strengths as a teacher. It is true that when I walk into my class I feel an energy and buzz that is so reciprocal and directly related to the relationship I have formed with a group of students and their contributions. These praises give renewed vigour and meaning to my teaching and speak for themselves in terms of the deeper connections. My commitment to my students is supported by their genuine and heartfelt comments. In comparison, the institute-wide teaching appraisal documents, with their narrow parameters of criteria that teachers are measured against, rarely reveal the depth of openness that my 'magic box' did. The authentic nature of the box contents was truly liberating and life-giving.

There was also the possibility for students to provide on-going feedback throughout the semester (when it was relevant, timely and pertinent) and could potentially lead to changes that we could all experience *during* the semester. This, rather than wait until the end of the semester/paper and seek feedback that entails memory recall and lacks the opportunity for us to grow together as a group and/ or deal with issues that these first year students may not have been able to approach me with in person.

These comments led me to the first proposition. It is an ongoing one that I identify with and strive towards for continued understanding and development. The first proposition is as follows:

As a teacher, I need to be aware of my own, and my students' fear in the balance of power, as we work towards creating spaces that are inclusive and mindful of diversity and difference.

This semester I have been building on this proposition through the AI process and seeking to get to know my students; in particular, the students with English as an additional language. In the past I have felt that our time together has been compromised by the language barrier.

The second proposition that was constructed from this process was:

As a teacher I need to create more opportunities for the student voice to be heard as this personalises my understanding of how they are 'with' me and in my presence.

Another key theme to be revealed in this small inquiry is linked to my personality and demeanour in class regarding my teaching methods that, while appearing positive and empowering, could also be interpreted as being dominant. I feel that with my dynamic personality some students may feel less inclined to contribute their ideas and speak out as I tend to 'fill' the spaces with my identity and being; thus potentially silencing them in the process. This relates to Palmer's paradoxical tensions and is a challenge for me as an educator.

Connections can also be found with the philosopher Bakhtin's ideas of the role of educational leaders whose role it is to create learning environments in which students from diverse cultures and backgrounds can learn together: 'As educators we need to speak less and listen more in order to recognise that we can never change another person but only the ways in which we understand

and present ourselves' (Shields, 2007, p. 83). It is my role, after all, to help students find their own voice, and be empowered to express their ideas in a non-threatening and supportive environment. Within this, there must be room for debate, challenge and questions that lead us into new understandings and always with the goal in mind that deeper learning should occur.

EXPERIENCE B

A further area of practice that was considered through the AI lens is my co-teaching and co-researching with another colleague. We had undertaken a small research project that involved both questionnaires and focus groups to re-examine the adult's role in children's visual arts in early childhood education. After the completion of our co-teaching, and at the end of our first stage of the research, my colleague sent me a letter to thank me and to celebrate what we had shared and achieved. This was in response to my request for some genuine and authentic feedback using the AI model first stage – Discovery. This was the most profound, revealing and illuminating feedback I had ever received professionally. It must be said that it often takes someone else to articulate and recognise the strengths of one's practice. This constructive feedback allows for the possibility of meaningful reflection based on heartfelt and honest feedback. Within the letter, two themes emerged in this appreciation and support.

The first related to aspects of my character. The key concepts to emerge were: integrity, determination, honouring other people, passion, energy and commitment. The second related to the professional dimension linked to the transmission of knowledge and my expertise as an educator in the university setting (though it must be stated that the two are intrinsically bound together). My colleague stated: 'Striving for perfection, support for me (her) as a professional, and the collaborative, collegial nature of our shared work together, challenging students, firing up the students, inspiring, guiding, supporting, giving insight to, [and the] exceedingly powerful, exceedingly wonderful experience we shared together'.

It is possible to construct further 'provocative propositions' (English, Fenwick & Parsons, 2003) that embody my professional role and harness these attributes into more of a heightened educational focus. Provocative propositions are those that incite challenge in an affirming way. Feedback from my well-respected colleague has the potential for being provocative, challenging and inspiring. The third provocative proposition to emerge is:

As a teacher I need to create the space for formal and informal contemplative feedback from my colleagues as this brings a lens on my teaching practice that affirms my worth.

The fourth provocative proposition that I have constructed from the colleague's correspondence is:

As a teacher I need to 'dwell' on the feedback of my colleagues finding newer ways to 'be' as a teacher that harnesses their feedback and inspirational leadership and helps reveal my own inner potentials.

The application of these propositions has already begun, and will continue, as I have just completed a formal institute-wide assessment of the paper taught this semester. I will compare this to the more informal responses gained earlier in the semester to see if there are further areas to celebrate and reflect upon. The formal evaluation of our papers (SEP – Student Evaluation of Papers) is a tool used throughout the university in which students respond anonymously to a tick box type questionnaire.

The quest is to always continue on the journey for further, deepened, and heightened connections between myself and my students so that meaningful learning and relationships may occur. I have found that the feedback I have received has enhanced and affirmed many of my teaching practices and mode of 'being' with people with whom I work and teach; both students and colleagues alike. This has led to the final proposition for this part of my teaching journey:

As a teacher, I will work towards finding the qualities and unique 'essence' in my students and colleagues so that these may be celebrated and acknowledged in a more responsive and reciprocal manner.

Some critics of AI have suggested that AI may gloss over potential problems and that these will not be resolved unless dealt with in a more direct manner (Reed Pearson, Swinburne & Wilding, 2002). Advocates of AI, however, state that issues and their potential answers or solutions are not a negation of the issues but a shift in focus towards a more positive perspective or outcome (Kerka, 2003). It is this rationale that I more closely align with. The Discovery phase of my study has mostly revealed positive perspectives of my professional practice. It now remains to be seen how these can be harnessed and developed with a focus on deepening the educational focus within the six paradoxical tensions outlined by Palmer. These tensions, with their emphasis on a holistic vision for education, provide a new spiritual focus and intent for my future teaching practice, and link to my propositions.

CONCLUSION

The inquiry thus far has revealed the 'adventure' of the Appreciative Inquiry journey (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 25). With any new journey there is uncertainty and risk through the processes of exploration and discovery, of which the four phases are only one way to comprehend and make meaning of one's teaching practice. The findings of this small inquiry give me strength and renewed passion for my role as an educator. As I adapt the AI philosophy to my teaching and see where the journey will take all the travellers involved, new life, sustenance and growth will be revealed. This links back nicely to the frond metaphor that shaped and helped the inquiry.

Palmer (1998) states that, 'Holding the tension of paradox so that our students can learn at deeper levels is among the most difficult demands of good teaching' (p. 83). Recognising this difficulty is the first stage of addressing it in the next part of my journey. The five propositions outlined have their roots embedded in an increasingly authentic teaching-learning practice. By combining the AI philosophy and Palmer's paradoxical tensions, a creativity of approach has been developed with some powerful findings to reflect upon further. As my journey continues, I trust it will improve both my own practices and inform the practice of others.

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Nicky is teaching on curriculum papers in the degree with an interest in developing students' understandings around sound pedagogical practices within the early childhood domain. Of particular interest is finding the balance between this and the creation of dynamic learning spaces. This ties in with her interest in both the role of the teacher in creating these spaces through collaborative processes in the classroom setting, and how this will translate into practice in the early childhood setting.