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An appreciative approach to inquiry

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Introduction

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- explain the differences between problem-focused and appreciative- and generative-focused forms of inquiry
- identify positive aspects of practice which have the potential for building from and be able to re-orientate a problem towards taking a more appreciative stance
- explain the limitations of target/outcome action-planning and devise a game plan for inquiry which allows you to be improvisatory and responsive to the complexities of educational inquiry
- tell your story of inquiry in ways that move others towards a shared vision of possible future practices.

Introduction

This free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, is 15 hours of study divided into five study 'sessions'. Each session involves approximately 3 hours of study, although there are ongoing tasks which can be developed beyond the duration of this course, and over time. Whilst you may choose to work through one session per week, you should also feel free to work at a pace that suits you and at times that fit around your daily life and routine. Indeed, if you are using this course alongside an inquiry project, you may choose to complete sections of it over a longer period of time.

The five sessions are linked to ensure a coherent flow through the course as follows:

Session 1: What do we mean by inquiry?

This session will consider the central role that inquiry (also known as practitioner research, scholarship of teaching and learning, or small-scale action research) plays in our educational contexts. It considers assumptions and beliefs about what is involved in inquiry, and supports you in understanding the differences between problem focused forms of inquiry and those which start from an appreciative stance. A series of activities refocuses attention on positive aspects of practice and awareness of what it feels like when we appreciate what is happening in a particular moment.

Session 2: Immersing and appreciating

This session considers the ways in which immersing ourselves in our environment and appreciating its strengths can help us to bring new ways of seeing to our process of inquiry. Through a series of activities it explores the ways in which storytelling can act as a way into appreciative inquiry and demonstrates the value of drawing out a variety of perspectives. Then you will turn to your own practice to begin to identify a focus for your inquiry.

Session 3: Imagining and dreaming

This session will introduce you to the central role of imagining and dreaming within an appreciative approach to inquiry. Using the stories that you began to generate is

Session 2, it uses a series of creative writing and image activities to explore how to ‘push outwards’ from positive aspects of practice you have already identified to generate possibilities for new practices and thinking.

Session 4: Innovating and designing

In this session you will consider the limitations of target driven action planning, and consider the importance of improvisatory, responsive action as part of generating change. By writing provocative proposition statements, either individually or as an inquiry group, and then identifying key themes, you will begin to consider the conditions necessary to ‘game plan’ ethical inquiry actions.

Session 5: Re-immersing and delivering

This session considers the question of what is meant by inquiry, by considering appreciative inquiry as a form of praxis, which foregrounds the role of both reflection and action in bringing about transformation. Through this view of praxis, it considers the role of re-immersion as a process of coming to know what has changed as a result of our inquiries and how this has ‘met’ the real-life contexts of our work. The final section of this session explores how the story of our inquiry can be told as a form of reporting, or as a way of coalescing colleagues or others around our newly generated stories of practice.

Session 1: What do we mean by inquiry?

Introduction

Practitioner inquiry (which is also known as scholarship of teaching and learning, or practitioner research) has long been established as an important part of educational practice. Much of our thinking about inquiry is still shaped by Dewey's (1933) discussions about the vital role of reflection as being the driver for practitioners to undertake inquiries into processes of teaching and learning. Dewey's writings about inquiry can be seen to underpin many models of reflective practice and action research cycles, which are widely used throughout education. But, in this cycle of reflect-inquiry-reflect, the focus of inquiry tends to foreground what could have gone better, or what was not achieved, rather than what went well, and what we could build on.

This course will help you reframe reflection and inquiry, to open up a more appreciative space full of positive possibility. Underpinning our course is the literature around appreciative inquiry (see Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008), which has gained significant attention in the last decade across a range of fields. We have adapted the appreciative inquiry model to provide an approach to educational practitioner inquiry or scholarship.

Welcome to Session 1 of *An appreciative approach to inquiry*. You will start by considering the questions:

- What is meant by inquiry and how does that relate to you?
- How is inquiry shaped in educational contexts and what are the potential difficulties raised by these approaches?
- What might an appreciative stance to inquiry offer in generating new forms of finding out and changing practices as a result?

The examples you will explore relate to inquiry in a broad range of educational contexts. But, the issues raised are much more widely applicable to any context involving humans working in complex and dynamic situations.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- reflect on your own experiences and assumptions about what inquiry is
- understand key reasons for adopting an appreciative approach to inquiry
- begin to develop an appreciative approach to your own context and professional learning.

The session will start by exploring what is meant by the term inquiry.

1 What do we mean by inquiry?

The etymology of inquire (and the alternative spelling enquire) is from the old French word, meaning ‘seek’.

This association with seeking, looking into, having sight of and finding is significant in how the term inquiry is often considered alongside the term research. So, it is not a surprise that much literature on practitioner inquiry stems from Stenhouse’s notion of a research-informed teaching profession (Wall and Hall, 2017). This association between inquiry and research can result in a particular view of what inquiry involves, based on a particular view of what social sciences research involves.

Figure 1 A view on the meaning of inquire

Activity 1 What does the term inquiry mean to you?

Allow about 10 minutes

Think about the terms inquiry and research and what they mean to you in your context. Draw a concept map with the two terms pushing outwards from the centre. Write down as many words or phrases as you can about your understanding of what inquiry and research are and what they involve. Where are the similarities and differences between the two terms and how they are understood in your context?

Discussion

How you respond to the words inquiry and research will be shaped by your experiences of the terms being used. This might stem from how they are used in your context (e.g. the educational institution you work for), in other roles or experiences you have had (whether in jobs or study experiences), or how they are used in media and by society at large (e.g. in newspapers, social media). You might find that your responses to each are very similar, or that you see a difference in *who* does each, *where* each occur, and *how* each are conducted.

In practice, there are many different research approaches and methodologies, and so there are many different approaches to inquiry. Wall, Beck and Scott (2020) suggest inquiry is written about in two ways; as a stance and as a project.

Inquiry as a stance

Where inquiry is a ‘way of being’, a type of relationship with other people, ideas, materials. As a stance, inquiry is a constant alertness to what is being questioned, researched and revised as a result. In doing so, it involves acknowledging that everyone involved in an inquiry community are knowers, learners, researchers, and are constantly theorising and creating narratives about what is happening.

Inquiry as a project

This is how inquiry is more commonly conceived, where it is related to defined, time specific intervention or a series of activities that are planned in advance. Wall, Beck and Scott (2020) discuss this form of inquiry as ‘a strategic finding out’ through processes of ‘investigation that can be explained or defended’ (Mentor *et al*. in Wall, Beck and Scott, 2020). This is the form of inquiry that borrows language and processes from research (including assumptions about the nature of this).

Adopting an appreciative approach to inquiry arguably straddles both these definitions. We can adopt an appreciative stance towards our practices as a constant process of identifying opportunities to build from what is already working well. Alternatively, we might deliberately set out on a more defined project or intervention, using an appreciative

approach. Whatever approach taken, it is important to consider how inquiry is discussed and enacted in educational contexts, which will be explored in the next section.

1.1 The role of inquiry in educational contexts

Education is a complex and messy entanglement of people, materials, spaces, policies, practices and theories. We operate in a constantly moving environment, where questions such as ‘why did that not work as I had planned?’, ‘why did the learners not respond as I expected?’, ‘how could I teach that differently next time?’ or ‘why is this group not achieving as they could?’ are a daily feature of our lives.

Figure 2 Teacher taking answers from children with their hands up

As professionals committed to doing the best for our learners and improving our own practices, reflection and inquiry are highly valued within our education contexts. This can be seen in the ways in which reflection and inquiry are ‘built in’ to our systems and practices.

Three case studies of inquiry

a. An Early Childhood undergraduate module

As part of a first-year undergraduate module, ‘Exploring perspectives on young children’s lives and learning’, students are asked to complete a number of activities that involve them observing and reflecting on young children’s experiences and talking to practitioners about issues raised in the module. They are asked to identify aspects that they find interesting as the basis of their assignment writing. While these activities aren’t named as such, the emphasis throughout the module is to develop an ‘inquiring approach’, which arises from ideas, images, videos and discussions that catch the attention of the student.

b. Scotland professional learning for teachers

Teachers in Scotland have to meet professional standards of practice set out by the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS). As part of a revised set of standards, practitioner enquiry is embedded throughout the standards, where enquiry 'involves teachers questioning their own educational beliefs, assumptions, values and practices' and is achieved through 'adopting an enquiring stance to challenge and inform their professional practice … to enhance, progress and lead the learning experiences of all their learners, including colleagues and partners' (GTCS). This focus on practitioner enquiry is reflected in the National Model of Professional Learning, whereby 'Learning by enquiring' is considered to be a key feature of high quality professional learning (Education Scotland). Evidence of inquiry forms part of teachers' professional update processes for GTCS.

c. Higher Education Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

Scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is embedded in the culture of many higher education institutes. For example, at The Open University, each faculty has a dedicated scholarship centre, and staff apply for funding on a bi-annual basis to conduct scholarship activities, often focusing on pressing emergent issues. SoTL is defined as 'educators moving beyond reflection upon their teaching strategies to an intentional, rigorous and systematic inquiry to investigate teaching practices and pedagogical strategies for student learning and engagement' (OpenLearn 2021). Time for scholarship is factored into the workload of most academic staff in the university as an important driver for innovation, development and improvement.

While inquiry and reflection are a key part of educational practices, your own reasons for engaging with this course, at this point in your career, will be influenced by a number of factors as you will now explore in Activity 2.

Activity 2 Inquiry expectations in your context

Allow about 5 minutes

Consider what attracted you to engage with this course. What expectations are there in your context for engaging with inquiry? What do you feel you can gain from engaging with inquiry?

Discussion

Your motivation for engaging with this course will be unique to you. Expectations from your context about undertaking inquiry, your own intrinsic interest in exploring an area of practice, and perhaps, formal study which requires you to undertake inquiry, may all play a part in your decision to engage with this course. However, different people and organisations will have different ideas about what inquiry is. Understanding these assumptions or opinions about inquiry is important in navigating your own inquiry processes within your setting, as we will explore in the next section.

1.2 Challenges of educational inquiry

Working within any institution involves negotiating a complex set of practices, assumptions, images and narratives of what inquiry means. These may be internal to the institution (i.e. particular to the FE college, school, university, Early Years setting) or they may be part of a broader set of values and assumptions that derive from policy or guidance within the sector.

Figure 3 Working together at a desk

Case study: A conversation between two practitioners during an annual review meeting

Lucy: So, I think it would be good for you to undertake an inquiry project next year using your professional development workload as it will help you work towards the promotions criteria. Have you thought at all about what you might look at?

Nell: Yes, I have been thinking for a while that there is a problem about engaging our struggling learners in using some of our IT programmes, which could actually help them a huge amount if they would take the time to work on it.

Lucy: Okay, great – finding out why they aren't engaging would be really helpful as I know we are struggling with a similar thing in my department. Can you make sure that, when you collect your data, you focus on the cohort with Daria, Shenna and Chloe in it? Are you thinking of observing them with the IT, or running additional support sessions? How are you going to baseline the problem first? I'd really like to know what the block to them engaging is.

Nell: I'm not sure. Actually, I don't find they are the ones struggling. For me, it is more widespread than that, it is the *way* the learners are engaging, not a specific group who aren't. I suppose I'm more interested in how we can use the IT in a

different way – how we might introduce it or teach it differently. I have a friend who uses it very differently to us and I wonder if it's worth exploring that approach.

Lucy: Yes, sure. I would get some baseline information about this group first, though, otherwise how are you going to know if you've had any impact? Do you think you might be able to do something to help with our inclusivity policy, which we are going to rewrite next academic year? It would be good to include your recommendations if we can.

Activity 3 Assumptions about the term 'inquiry'

Allow about 10 minutes

Consider the conversation above. What assumptions are embedded in it? You might think about what is considered to be the *purpose, methods* and *outcomes* of inquiry.

Discussion

You may have considered some of the following aspects which are implied in the conversation.

- Inquiry linked to personal professional standings – i.e. directly linked to promotion.
- Inquiry as focused on an identified problem – something that needs solving.
- Inquiry outcomes as transferable – i.e. the reasons for non-engagement will be the same across different contexts.
- Inquiry as finding out knowledge about something that is already there and is collectable as data – i.e. seeing inquiry as uncovering or revealing a set of 'truths'.
- Inquiry as focused on investigating current issues or practices rather than about future practices or trying something different.
- Inquiry as having to have a quantitative measurement of impact, from a baseline, to show what has happened as a result.
- Inquiry as an alignment of personal practices with institutional or local/regional/national policy drivers.
- Inquiry as an individual responsibility.

Of course, none of these assumptions in themselves are incorrect. Inquiry can be all of these things, but this course will begin to show that it doesn't *have to be*, and that every aspect, from the initial stimulus right through to enacting different practices as a result, can be framed differently. But, to do inquiry differently, it is important to understand these assumptions and values that you may come across in conversations with colleagues or in the processes of inquiry that you are supported to use. One significant assumption that underpins much of the discussion about inquiry is the problem based approach.

The next section will explain what this is and how appreciative inquiry challenges this assumption.

2 A problem based approach to inquiry

Many models of inquiry start with a process of identifying the problem or question, often making a direct link between critical reflection and this identification process. This link can be seen in the case study you've just read in Section 1.2, where Nell has critically reflected on an issue within her teaching that she then bases the idea of an inquiry around. This notion of there being a 'problem to solve' is then further articulated by Lucy, linking it to a perceived problem in her own department.

Figure 4 Question marks

In this problem focused view of inquiry, success is perceived as being able to identify the problem or deficiencies, understand the problem (why it occurs, what factors intersect with it) and then to find possible solutions to it, developing a plan of action as a result (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008). Of course, there are some situations in which this is exactly the type of approach needed. But, appreciative inquiry literature argues that this problem based approach to inquiry creates a deficit model, whereby the focus is always on what skills, knowledge or understanding is lacking or needs to be corrected (Scott and Armstrong, 2019). At the core of such approaches to inquiry is a view that organisations, and therefore the practices of educators within the organisation, are problems to be solved (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008). This can lead to feelings of vulnerability, stress or negativity, where we always have something lacking in ourselves and our practices that needs 'fixing', and where the solutions are all there, we are just not taking the time to find them.

Appreciative inquiry challenges this problem-solving, deficit view of inquiry. Instead of asking us to identify what is missing or what is inadequate, it asks us to focus on practices that are positive, life-affirming, successful and full of opportunity for building, for growth, for pushing forwards. This is a significantly different stance towards professional inquiry.

The next section will outline the key features of an appreciative approach to inquiry.

3 An appreciative approach to inquiry

Like many models of inquiry or reflective practice, appreciative inquiry is based on a cycle. In the original appreciative inquiry, there were four parts to the cycle (Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver), although there are variations on this. For the purposes of this course, we have created a variation to the original 4D model that aligns itself with inquiry in educational contexts, and the particular creative methodological approaches we feel support this type of inquiry.

Each segment of the model relates to one session of this course, where defining and redefining the inquiry occurs across every stage. **Click on the circle below to reveal each segment. Then click each segment to find out more about each stage.**

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Figure 5 The 4D model

Activity 4 Exploring the interactive model

Allow about 10 minutes

Take some time to explore each section of the cycle. You will notice as you go through the course that the process mapped here as a cycle with a particular order isn't necessarily experienced like this. As you develop your own appreciative approach to inquiry, you may create your own 'map' of the journey, where different parts may overlap, become simultaneous or be revisited at various points.

As you read each section, consider how it relates to your initial ideas about inquiry, which you noted down in Activity 1.

- How does it differ?
- How is it similar?
- Which words/descriptions excite you the most and why?

Discussion

The language of the appreciative inquiry cycle might be quite different from the terms you are used to thinking about and writing inquiry with. Terms such as dreaming, imagination and appreciating aren't often discussed in relation to inquiry. This course will explore how you can use different language for inquiry to stimulate and generate different thinking and doing. In doing so, the next section begins to explore what it means to be appreciative as an inquirer.

4 An appreciative stance *and* process

Wall, Beck and Scott (2020) discuss inquiry as being both a stance and a particular form of project work. Adopting an appreciative approach to inquiry can involve a significant shift in how you think and act about inquiry as an educator, where you have to adapt your stance, as well as how you might conceive of a particular project idea.

This section looks at some of the 'ways of being' appreciative that underpin the approach. Some of these may feel intuitive and you may feel you already act and see the world in this way. Some may feel more challenging, where you may feel you have been socialised into a more critical, problem focused way of viewing inquiry. Throughout the other weeks of the course, activities and techniques will continue to be introduced to develop a more appreciative approach. It starts by considering what it means to develop an appreciative mindset.

4.1 An appreciative mindset

We are often conditioned to identify the problems, the things that aren't going as well as we had hoped and the areas that we feel we need to pay more attention to. It can be challenging to articulate what is going well, where our successes are, and when we feel confident and content. This is often a conversation that is skimmed over in favour of concentrating our discussions on addressing the trickiest or emotionally difficult aspects of our practice. But, an appreciative approach to inquiry directly challenges this. It asks us to consider moments of positivity, practices that are having the greatest impact or those things about our work that make us feel most inspired, happy and energised.

Figure 6 Meeting online

An appreciative approach proposes that it is exactly these aspects we ought to be paying attention to as a possible driver for inquiry into future practices. As Bushe (2007) states, an appreciative mindset is to 'recognise … what exists already and use this … to get more' (p. 6), where we are able to identify possibilities that emerge from people and processes that are working well. We may already know where exciting, interesting and new practices are developing, but often we don't think that these could or should be the focus of inquiry.

Activity 5 Appreciating practices

Allow about 15 minutes

Make a note of the following examples:

- The last time you had a conversation with a colleague or peer about something really exciting, interesting, or energising that happened in your practice. What was it and why did you discuss it?
- An element of your practice that you feel proud of.
- An idea, resource or practice that you haven't had the opportunity to try out, but that excites you. Why does it excite you?
- Something that you feel has made a significant, positive difference to your practice in the last two years. What is it and why has it been a positive change? How did it come about?

Reflect on your answers to these questions. How easy or challenging did you find answering the questions? Why do you think this may be?

Discussion

Shifting from a culture where we are less likely to explicitly discuss successes, achievements and positive change, to one where we openly discuss these aspects of practice can make us feel a little self-conscious. It can sometimes feel boastful or unnecessary when there are problems to solve, but as this course will explore, these positive spaces are the very places where you can generate and develop practices that can make a significant difference in your contexts.

This activity has focused your attention on you as an individual. But, developing a collective appreciative mindset is an important consideration when working with others in inquiry. When we bring together a group of people, each will have a slightly different narrative based on a collective oral tradition as to what happens, why it happens that way and what experiences are collectively valued as positive. These stories are an important part of an appreciative approach to inquiry and will be explored in more detail in Session 2.

The next section will look at what it means to develop an appreciative gaze.

4.2 An appreciative gaze

Activity 5 asked you to take time to consider and appreciate the positive, impactful and exciting aspects of your work. You may have found it challenging to think of responses to each question, or you may feel that it came quite easily. Part of developing an appreciative

approach is about how we *see* practices. Critical reflection can often 'reflect back' the issues and problems we face, which can create a deficit spiral of feeling there is a list of endless problems to be solved. But, an appreciative approach to inquiry asks us to gaze differently (Ghaye *et al*., 2008), changing the way we see issues. This can be important where there is already a strong narrative around a particular issue. As Bhaskar states, this is about starting 'from what is actually happening – not from what appears to be happening or what our initially limited understanding leads us to believe is happening' (Ghaye *et al*., 2008, p. 371). It is only by gazing *beyond* dominant narratives or images about an issue, that we can then begin to understand issues of power, politics and resources that both limit but could also be opportunities for future actions.

Being able to gaze differently, reframing issues in a different way to help 'see beyond' current understandings, opens up creative opportunities for inquiry. The case study provides an example of how reframing and reseeing an issue generated different responses.

Case study: A teacher wellbeing during Covid-19

A group of primary and secondary teachers in Scotland met in a workshop to reflect on how Covid-19 had impacted on teacher wellbeing during the pandemic and how they could support their colleagues and themselves going forward. Inevitably, each person came with experiences of the negative impacts that Covid had had on their wellbeing; the uncertainty, the additional workload, the sudden changes in policies and practices. The workshop facilitator, knowing the likely experiences the group would bring, wanted to adopt a more future-looking approach.

While acknowledging the experiences the group had brought, she moved the group to consider the positive practices that had developed as a result of the pandemic. At first, this wasn't easy. But, through prompting the group to think about strengths that had been developed (people including teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and pupils, the wider community, environment, resources, school building, IT), the group began to articulate a broad range of strengths and opportunities that had already been developed. These included teacher online staffroom events, celebrations of staff achievement and birthdays, walks, timetabled team reflections, recognising skills and talents in the parent community that could help the school and its pupils, and the advantages of online professional learning opportunities as a networking and sharing space.

These ideas, some of which hadn't been considered in relation to teacher wellbeing before, provided generative and positive openings for the group to think forwards, appreciating what had actually occurred and the opportunities they created.

In the case study, the workshop facilitator had an idea about the dominant narratives that may be brought into the workshop and had an idea about how the issues could be reframed to appreciate the possibilities that had emerged from their experiences. Sometimes it is difficult to reframe an issue. A significant part of this course will be sharing ideas and experiences to support this process.

Armstrong, Holmes and Henning (2020) talk of 'flipping' issues to a positive opposite (p. 3). For example:

Issue	Flip towards the positive
Lack of engagement with IT package for learning	Equitable access to learning

Just by changing the focus from a problem towards the positive, by refocusing our gaze on appreciating a positive and different future, we can *see* the inquiry in a different way. In doing so, 'problems' become creative spaces in which we can generate and act towards a different future based on a solid foundation.

An important part of this solid foundation is a recognition that we inquire not only using our head, through thinking and writing, but with our whole bodies, with emotional and physical reactions which are key to understanding our experiences, as you will explore in the next section.

4.3 Appreciative embodied practices

Focusing on the best of what is currently being experienced, searching out those practices that are exciting and energising, isn't only a cognitive process. Instead, it is a process of doing – of acting and of feeling. Practices, by their very nature, particularly in the education professions, are 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity … organised round shared practical understanding' (Schatzki in Boud and Hager, 2012, p. 22–23).

Figure 7 Completing an active discussion task

It is through these embodied experiences (our practices) that we can identify exciting opportunities and energising ideas by paying attention to our emotional responses. Sometimes in problem-solving approaches, inquiry can be portrayed as quite a distant, scientific process where the subject of the inquiry, the methods of data collection and the reporting of recommendations relies on the inquirer being 'objective'. An appreciative approach ensures we bring ourselves into our inquiries, whether individually and/or

collectively. It recognises the role of our emotions and the physicality of our practices as spaces of creativity, where we can be generative and make differences.

Activity 6 Feeling when something good is occurring

Allow about 10 minutes

Think of a time when something went really well in your practice. It may have been something small like a particular interaction with a child, or it may be something larger like a successful project or sequence of learning.

- How do you physically react when something good is happening?
- How do you move?
- How do you feel?
- What physical and emotional signals do you display to others about what is happening?

Sometimes it is hard to think back and articulate our physical and emotional responses to events as these aspects are often downplayed, as something less important in inquiry than thinking and writing. However, being aware of how we feel, as an indication of what might have potential for exciting, generative, positive developments is important in an appreciative frame, as the next section will explore.

5 Inquiry as generative

Some authors who write about appreciative inquiry have argued for it to be renamed ‘generative inquiry’ (Zandee, 2013; Bushe, 2013), recognising that there is a danger that we solely focus on the positivity of the approach and risk downplaying real-life problems that need solving. In response, Bushe (2013) argues that an appreciative approach should focus on future-making, where generating new ideas, new thinking and new practices is central to its aims. It is this focus on generating different views, practices, ways of talking and speaking about what is happening that allows us to:

- challenge assumptions that underpin cultures of institutions, professions, fields of study
- reconsider aspects of practice that are ‘taken for granted’, allowing minor practices to become foregrounded
- change how people think about and see their practice.

Figure 8 Creative journalling

You will now consider how creative tasks can help generate new ideas, thinking and actions as you proceed through this course.

5.1 The role of creative writing/thinking/doing

To adopt an appreciative stance, or develop an appreciative inquiry project, whereby we deliberately set out to generate different metaphors, images, languages, stories, requires different types of action rather than those tied to reflection on the current. Instead, to generate requires us to be bravely creative, allowing ourselves to imagine, dream, think and explore. This is where creative writing/thinking/doing becomes important, where we can create spaces to play and explore differently and where we can open ourselves up to different ideas beyond the institutional or policy frameworks in which we practice.

While this course offers a range of creative activities to support you develop these generative spaces, you may find other ways of creating playful exploratory spaces. You (or a group of you, if working collaboratively) may find walking, drawing, photographing, crafting, gardening, swimming or playing with children or pets provides you with the creative spaces to generate different metaphors, images or ideas that prove productive.

Activity 7 Start an appreciative journal

Allow about 10 minutes

Find a notebook, folder or create a computer file in which you can keep your creative responses to this course. Add to your notes at any time by repeating activities or adding your own responses, thinking and connections that you make along the way. You may want to add images (either that you've taken or from other sources) and add these to your journal. Make sure you have the right permissions if you are taking workplace images. Be brave in your creativity, knowing that the process of creating will deepen your thinking.

The course will explore the link between creativity and an appreciative approach more in Session 2.

6 Summary of Session 1

This session of the free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, considered what inquiry in educational settings means, recognising that different people have different assumptions about the term and what it involves. It has acknowledged that many forms of educational inquiry start from a ‘problem-solving’ position, which is sometimes called a ‘deficit’ position, where there is always something ‘wrong’ with practices. While problem-solving inquiry based on a stimulus from critical reflection may be appropriate in some scenarios, an appreciative approach asks us to consider building from practices and experiences that are energising, exciting and which can generate new ideas, images, metaphors and stories for practices. Having considered the key aspects of an appreciative approach, including the appreciative cycle, the session began to think about what it means to enact an appreciative mindset and gaze, using all of our senses and being open to generating new ideas, using creative writing as a vehicle for playful explorations.

The next session will begin to explore how storytelling can help us re-see our contexts for professional learning inquiry.

Session 2: Immersing and appreciating

Introduction

Session 1 introduced you to an appreciative approach to inquiry. It considered its potential for adopting a positive stance in our explorations of experiences and practices that helps us to imagine and enact new ways of being and doing.

Figure 1 Immersing ourselves in inquiry

This session considers the ways in which immersing ourselves in our environment and appreciating its strengths can help us to bring new ways of seeing to our process of inquiry. This *discovery phase* involves us recalling, remembering and valuing the positive. Both individually and collectively, we immerse ourselves in an inquiry that explores past and present successes, a process that Marchin (2011) terms ‘affirmative competence’.

Individually and collectively, we ‘immerse’ ourselves in a particular situation or context, exploring all its detail with an appreciative gaze. Central to our discovery is the capacity to see the process as *generative* and able to act as a catalyst for transformation. Such a process is governed less by neatly contained reflective cycles and more by open-ended

reflections, questions and conversations. As you encountered in Session 1, this is what makes appreciative inquiry distinctive:

Rather than establishing and verifying conventional truths about what currently exists, the idea is to interrupt habitual practice by exploring and inspiring innovative alternatives.

(Zandee, 2013, p. 70)

In this session, you'll think more deeply about what this shift in approach might look like in practice. Using an image as a starting point, you will encounter a series of activities that will help to take an appreciative, generative approach to an area of inquiry.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- appreciate the value of telling stories in recognising and reframing an area of interest
- use and adapt storytelling activities in an appreciative inquiry context
- identify an aspect of practice that might form the basis for a practitioner inquiry.

1 Telling stories

Appreciative inquiry begins with our stories: the ways in which we tell them and the starting points they give us for generating new ways of seeing. As part of this storytelling, we use metaphors and images to shape how we tell stories about our practice. Metaphors and images are significant in themselves, but they are often accompanied by elaborate national, institutional or peer developed stories. These stories are vitally important as a 'portal through which … the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful' (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 477), but they can also 'constitute a part of our horizon, a limitation in our way of seeing' (Georgii-Hemming, 2007, p. 13). In educational settings, these stories can include images and expected actions in our role as practitioners, assumptions about the role of education in a particular phase, stories that maintain reliance on particular systems, or traditions and expectations we constantly reinforce through our actions. These stories, which we are socialised into, and which we contribute to, shape *why* and *how* we act in certain ways and cannot be underestimated, but we often don't consider how 'different stories' would impact on our practices.

We also often tell short stories (sometimes as headlines), whereby the details that may actually be the most important aspect are left out. This takes us to the very core of an appreciative approach to inquiry, which aims to make us pay attention to our current stories, immersing ourselves fully in their details, finding elements of our stories that excite, energise and intrigue us, and in doing so opening up possibilities for inquiring and building on these generative aspects of practice. Storytelling therefore creates spaces that allow us to 'trouble' (Haraway, 2016) current narratives, images, metaphors and practices, and generate different stories and alternative possibilities that enable people (individuals or organisations) to practice differently. As Haraway (2016) states, '… it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with … It matters what stories make worlds' because 'they propose and enact patterns for participants to inhabit' (pp. 10–12).

As stories (encompassing metaphors and images) are the vehicle of an appreciative approach to inquiry, in this session, we will ask you to undertake a number of writing activities (either individually or collectively if you are inquiring with others). We begin with a series of activities that model the process of using story as a way into appreciative inquiry and then turn to your own practice to identify an area of inquiry that interests you.

Activity 1 Starting with an image

Allow about 15 minutes

We do not often take the time or find the space to allow ourselves to freely explore the stories we practice within. This free writing activity aims to begin the process of immersing yourself in a process of discovering and surfacing these stories. You will use an image as a stimulus for telling stories that are important to you and relate to areas of interest and potential inquiry in your own practice.

Watch this brief video introduction to the 'rules' of free writing [you may want to enlarge the viewing window to full screen]:

Video content is not available in this format.

Free writing

Choose one of the images below. Which one immediately draws your attention? What does it say to you about your practice, your inquiry or scholarship, or your institution or organisation?

Figure 2 Children at desks listening to a teacher at the front

Figure 3 Young children exploring the ground underneath some trees

Figure 4 A group of young adults in a circle on a stage

Now set a five-minute timer and use the image and your initial reflections as a stimulus for a piece of free writing. Remember to write continuously, not solely describing the image, but using it as a starting point to tell a story of your own. At this stage, we are freeing up our thinking so let your writing take you in whatever direction it goes.

Note: You may want to return to this activity a number of times, using stimuli linked more directly to your area of inquiry or in response to new ideas you develop during the process. It also works well as a collective activity, whereby individuals writing from the same stimuli can generate multiple perspectives and ideas to follow.

Provide your answer...

We tell stories all the time. In educational settings, where we are all very busy, these stories can sometimes be reduced down to headlines, titles or very small snippets during conversations with colleagues or learners. Allowing ourselves the time and space to go beyond these headlines (and five minutes can sometimes feel like a very long time) allows us to immerse ourselves in a broader view of practices. This breadth is critical to appreciative inquiry. We need to not only see the issues or problems, often quickly reported as a headline, but also the possibilities that lie in the small details that offer a way forward or a generative idea to build on. So, as well as telling stories, we also need to think with these stories, to find the things that excite, intrigue and engage us to want to inquire further.

Note: The next set of activities invites you to think with the free writing you have just completed. Later in the session you will complete activities linked to your own inquiry area. Together, these activities provide a suite of options that you can use by yourself or collaboratively to support the immersion phase of the appreciative approach.

2 Thinking with stories

When you return to your free writing you may feel that you haven't told a story as you might think of it. It may not have a beginning, middle and end. It may be full of questions that you have asked, or expressions of emotions or identification of problems (we will come onto reframing stories away from problems towards appreciating the positive or generative possibilities later in this session). But, whatever you have written is likely to have some story elements that you can think with, and you can return to these later to add more detail. In particular, it is likely you have some sort of narrative arc, you will likely have characters and you may have begun to highlight small details within the story that may provide interesting starting points for inquiry.

The next activities will help you think with your story in these ways.

2.1 Narrative arcs

Todorov (1969) identified a common narrative arc that can help us consider the possible stories that the image you selected for your free writing might tell you about an issue or an area of interest in your own practice.

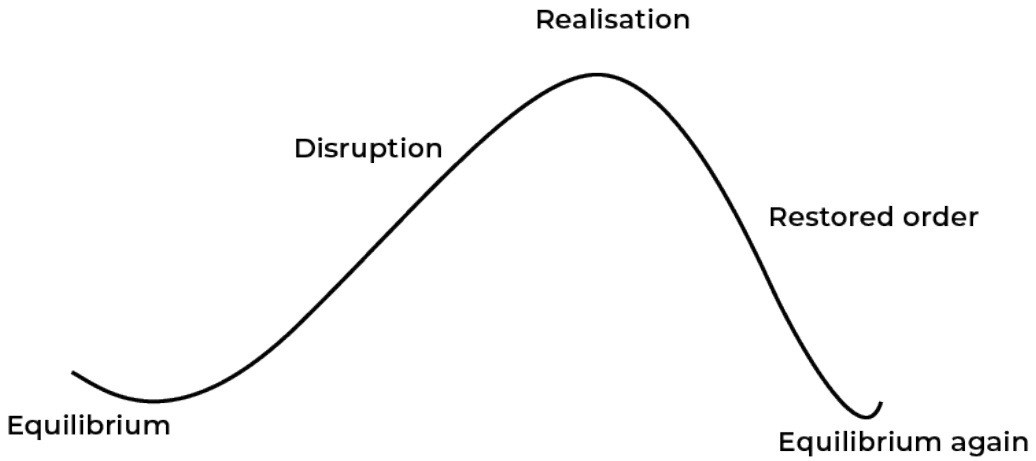


Figure 5 Todorov's narrative arc

There are five stages of the narrative:

1. **Equilibrium** exists at the start of the story – this is the 'steady state' where things are all as they should be.
2. **Disruption** occurs when an action or a character disrupts the equilibrium and creates a problem.
3. **Realisation** occurs when the characters acknowledge the problem and undertake a quest to solve it. The narrative builds to a climax.
4. **Restored order** develops as the damage is gradually repaired and the problem solved.

5. **Equilibrium again** occurs when the problem is fully solved and some form of (new) reality is possible.

Activity 2 Searching for narrative arcs

Allow about 15 minutes

Return to your free writing and the image and begin to search for a narrative arc. What is the *story* of the image – where does it begin, what are the key incidents, who are the important characters? You might find your narrative arc within your free writing, or you may want to return to the image and consider afresh the story that it tells, using your free writing as a reminder of what it was in the image that struck you and provoked a response.

Now plot your narrative using the grid below:

Story title	*Provide your answer...*
Equilibrium	*Provide your answer...*
Disruption	*Provide your answer...*
Realisation	*Provide your answer...*
Restored order	*Provide your answer...*
Equilibrium again	*Provide your answer...*

When you have completed the grid, spend a few moments reflecting:

- What are the key moments?
- Are there particular characters that seem central to the narrative?
- What positive steps were taken to overcome the disruption?
- Might there be more than one possible ending?

Make some notes on your responses to each of these questions.

Discussion

Todorov's (1969) narrative arc, while it may not align completely with our initial telling of a story, gives us a way to think with our writing and to begin to explore it in more depth. On the face of it, Todorov's focus on overcoming problems within the story can be seen to go against the appreciative inquiry approach. Yet, the very

challenge of bringing these stories to a place of equilibrium, the 'push' to resolve, to see what or who or how we can focus on resolutions, can engage us in developing positive responses to challenging issues and in imagining more than one possible ending or solution. These things are at the heart of appreciative inquiry, but we may need to play around with our initial stories a little to help us realise their potential.

In the next section, you will consider how viewing stories from different perspectives can help to generate new possibilities.

2.2 Appreciating different perspectives

Bushe (2007, p. 30) suggests there are many ways in which appreciative inquiry can be generative in its 'quest for new ideas, images, theories and models' that can move us beyond dominant ways of seeing to imagine alternatives. Adopting this 'appreciative gaze' towards a particular issue or situation often involves seeing things from different perspectives, and this is where the power of story really comes into its own. Such an approach is all part of the process of immersion; it enables us to pause and to pay close attention to everything within a scene or context, including those things that may initially seem so to be of little or no significance.

Zandee (2013) describes one dimension of inquiry as a process of building and maintaining connections with others that enable us to 'listen with a third ear and see with a third eye' (p. 77). Such connections are largely established through dialogue and help to surface different ways of seeing that can generate new understandings and actions.

Activity 3 Character perspectives

Allow about 10 minutes

Return to your chosen image and to one of the characters you have included in your story. How might their perspective differ from yours? If you were having a conversation with this character, how might it unfold? Write a short dialogue that captures this conversation. If you are studying this course with others, try to improvise this dialogue with them and record the conversation.

Now reflect on the dialogue you have created:

- What new ways of seeing the issues at stake have emerged?
- Do these suggest alternative interpretations of any part of the story?
- What new questions does it pose?

Make some notes on your responses to each of these questions.

Discussion

Keep your reflections to hand as you work through the rest of this course. The different perspective, interpretations and questions you have reflected on here may prove useful at a later stage in your inquiry.

Paying close attention to small details that we might have previously missed can also provide different ways of ‘seeing’ our stories. The next section will encourage you to consider your story again, noticing these small things.

2.3 Noticing small things

Another of Zandee’s (2013) dimensions of inquiry requires us to pay attention to the ‘small things’ (p. 77). Doing this requires us to intentionally slow down, allowing the space to focus on the unexpected and extraordinary, and to explore their significance. A small deviation from an expected pattern, a moment of clarity amid a seemingly insignificant moment – each of these things allows us to ‘attend to the budding stories and silenced voices’ that might pose new questions and lead our inquiry in new directions (p. 78).

Figure 6 Child looking through a magnifying glass at the ground

Activity 4 Paying attention to small things

Allow about 10 minutes

Return to your chosen image again, this time pausing to consider what you missed at first. Look specifically for the ‘small things’ that are not immediately obvious – a character or an object, the way characters are positioned or how the environment is structured.

Do any of these suggest alternative stories or give voice to different characters?

> Make some notes on your responses to this reflective question.

As you look back at your responses to the activities you have completed so far, you will notice that a single image can generate more than one story. As you immerse yourself in a context, you begin to see beyond the obvious, beyond the dominating narratives, to notice things that were not immediately apparent and to recognise alternative perspectives. These things are important parts of this phase of appreciative inquiry.

3 Starting points for inquiry

In this section, you will turn your attention to your own context and practice, identifying a focus for inquiry and applying some of the techniques you have already learned to help you consider this through an appreciative inquiry lens.

You might choose to complete the activities that follow on your own, or you may be working with others on a more collaborative inquiry. Equally, the timeframe in which you complete them will depend on the scale and timeline of your inquiry, from a few hours to perhaps even several weeks. Remember, the aim is to immerse yourself in a context and begin to view it with an appreciative gaze. As you work through the activities, immersing yourself in your context, you will move from a broad to a more clearly defined focus for your inquiry.

At this stage, you may have a focus for your inquiry, and you may have started from a problem-solving stance. Alternatively, you may not yet have a focus for your inquiry but want to use the appreciative approach to develop some ideas about what could become the focus. The following activities are aimed to differentiate between these two scenarios, allowing you to select activities that are most appropriate for the stage you are at.

Figure 7 Positive scrabble letters

First, it is important to start with a positive focus for your inquiry. If the purpose is expansive, such as strategic planning at institutional level, the inquiry focus needs to be suitably expansive; you may begin by telling stories about ‘the institution at its best’ (Cockell and McArthur Blair, 2020). Alternatively, there may be a tighter focus because the area of interest is narrower, whereby you may begin by telling stories about specific incidents, events, examples of practices at their best or most exciting. Either way, the key at this point is to frame the focus of the inquiry positively. If you are just beginning to identify a focus then complete Activity 5. Note: If you already have an inquiry focus, you might choose to move straight to Activity 6.

Activity 5 Beginning to identify a focus for an appreciative inquiry

Time for this activity is open-ended

This activity may take you a while to complete as you begin to consider what aspect (s) of your practice you want to focus on. If you are working collaboratively, you may need to complete this activity over a series of sessions, working both individually and then sharing your stories to collectively identify aspects you feel are worthy of becoming your focus. The activity below outlines this process, but you will need to adapt it to your circumstances.

Individually – spend time over the course of a day/week/month, writing short stories about aspects of practices that excite, energise or intrigue you. Also add in moments where you felt pride, appreciation for something going well, someone doing something interesting, and moments where you felt a sense of satisfaction. You may complete this as a series of free writing sessions, or you may decide to capture it in other ways (e.g. photographs, concept maps, notes).

Individually and/or collectively – bring your stories together into one place. Look across the stories for commonalities. What links the moments of positive emotions? What links the moments of pride, satisfaction? What exciting, energising or intriguing practices hold possibilities for further exploration?

Discussion

This is the beginning of identifying a 'positive core' for your inquiry. At this point, you don't need to 'fix' it as a definite focus, just have some ideas you can move through the rest of the sessions, refining and developing your focus as you go.

If you have come to this session with an already formed focus, you may need to reframe your inquiry towards an appreciative stance. Below are a set of three examples of how this can be done.

Review the two examples below on the process of reframing, and provide your response in the boxes provided.

Example 1

A question we often hear about students participating in online tutorials is, 'Why are students so reluctant to turn on their microphones or cameras to engage in the tutorial?'

How might you adapt this question to give it a positive focus?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Reframing this question with a positive focus might read something like:

What are the best examples of student engagement in online tutorials?

This re-worked question makes two important shifts. First, its use of the phrase 'best examples' helps to shift the focus from a negative view of students to

something more positive – a context in which they *do* engage. Second, the phrase 'student engagement' and the absence of the reference to microphone use begins to suggest that there are other ways of engaging students that are worth exploring.

Example 2

Research has shown that a significant proportion of children's reading outside of school does not involve reading books. For example, in 2011, text messages, magazines, websites and emails were found to be the most popular choices (Clark and Douglas, 2011, cited in Cremin *et al*., 2014, p. 11). How can we solve this problem?

How might this issue be framed more positively?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Reframing this question with a positive focus might read something like:

How can we capitalise on children's reading choices to enhance their reading skills and their enjoyment of texts?

This shift reflects other research suggesting that children are aware that they can 'gain different reading satisfactions from different types of text … since different forms of reading such as magazines, computer games, online material and fiction feed off one another' (Cremin *et al*., 2014). So, an appreciative inquiry relating to children's reading practices might focus on what children *do* read rather than what they *do not*.

Example 3

Last year, in your faculty, 11% of students withdrew from their studies before the end of the first term. How do we solve this problem?

What might this question look like given a positive focus?

Provide your answer...

Answer

Reframing this question with a positive focus might read something like:

What can we learn about the factors that influence 89% of our students to complete their studies that will help us to increase retention still further?

While 11% of students withdrew, this means that 89% did not. Therefore, one way of positively reframing this issue might be to focus your inquiry on the factors that influence the *retention* of 89% rather than the *withdrawal* of 11%.

In the next activity you will apply the same process of reframing to your own inquiry focus.

Activity 6 Positively reframing a problem-focused inquiry

Allow about 10 minutes

Now consider the area of your own context or practice that you want to use as a focus of inquiry. How will you positively reframe this? Write down three positive statements that could become the core of your inquiry.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Now that you have a positive focus for your inquiry, the next step is to become immersed in this focus, bringing an 'appreciative gaze' and beginning to generate stories, images and metaphors that act as a springboard to new ways of seeing.

Now that you have reframed the focus of your inquiry, the next section will help you to work with this positive core to generate new ways of thinking.

4 Immersing ourselves in our inquiry focus

Having developed or reframed your inquiry focus in Activities 5 or 6, we are now going to focus on immersing ourselves in the positive core of our area of inquiry. This phase of appreciative inquiry is about collecting positive, appreciative stories, and therefore is likely to take you some time to complete. You may also come back to this collecting phase in the later stages of the inquiry. As a result of this collecting and collating phase, you will begin to develop an understanding of where the potential for new thinking and generative doing is. We get to this point by finding the practices and strengths that already exist, but have the possibility for developing into different, and improved, ways of practicing.

Activity 7 Creating a tapestry of stories

Allow up to 1 hour

At this point, you are going to use three questions as starting points for gathering the stories that will generate a multi-faceted perspective on your inquiry focus:

1. What is your best experience of ... [your inquiry focus]?
2. What do you value most about ... ?
3. What are your three wishes for … ?

Spend some time gathering your own and others' responses to these questions. You might choose to:

- take pictures
- write short stories
- audio record a conversation with someone interesting
- collect objects/examples of work
- explore different metaphors
- search for examples on the internet or social media.

Figure 8 Part of a quilted tapestry

Activity 7 should have built a tapestry of evidence that casts an appreciative gaze over the area of your inquiry, from a range of perspectives. In doing so, you may have already begun to identify comments, images, stories, metaphors of interest. The following two activities will support you in thinking with these stories further to draw out the elements that feel most generative for thinking and doing differently.

Activity 8 Thinking with your inquiry stories

Allow about 15 minutes

To help you begin to make sense of the stories you have gathered, you're going to return to some free writing. You might want to refer back to the video in Activity 1 to remind you of the 'rules' of free writing. As with previous activities, you may complete this individually or collectively, building time to collaborate on what is emerging from the process as a group.

- Set a timer for five minutes and write without stopping about the stories you gathered for Activity 7. You might want to use the prompt questions in Activity 7 as a starting point or you might want to write completely freely to see what emerges – either is fine!
- Look back through your free writing. Each time you notice something – a word, a phrase, a sentence – that strikes you as interesting or significant, highlight it. Now write each of these words, phrases or sentences onto a separate sticky note and lay these out in front of you.
- Look back through the 'stories' that you collected as part of Activity 5. Do these trigger any further reactions and thoughts? Capture these words and phrases on sticky notes too.

Provide your answer...

For the next activity, you're going to do something that Simons (2009) terms 'dancing with the data' (p. 140). Simons advocates the use of creative art forms in the inquiry process, and this includes more tactile ways of working with data. One of these is to physically move data around, 'positioning and repositioning them until they make a certain sense' (p. 140). This way we bring different ideas, characters, small elements of our stories into contact with each other, creating opportunities to see or feel something different.

Activity 9 Dancing with your data to identify potential

Allow about 15 minutes

Working with your sticky notes, move them around and join them together to uncover patterns and connections between them. Are there core themes or clusters of themes that begin to emerge? Experiment with different ways of organising them until you arrive at an arrangement that best captures these.

Step back from your arrangement.

- Where are the most generative possibilities in your data?
- Where are the surprising elements?
- What feels new, exciting or intriguing to you at this stage?
- What particularly captures your attention?

Write these in a notebook or journal – these now becomes the generative 'springboards', which you will use to drive forward your inquiry. You will return to them in the next session.

5 Summary of Session 2

This session of the free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, has explored the many ways in which stories can help us to being the generative process that is at the heart of appreciative inquiry. These stories have enabled us to immerse ourselves in an area of inquiry, beginning to see the value of drawing out a variety of perspectives. It has also shown how reframing a problem or issue can help to re-orientate an inquiry towards a more positive stance.

The next session takes your inquiry focus (developed in activities 5-7) and your generative ‘springboards’ (developed in activities 8 and 9) into the next phase of the appreciative approach: imagining and dreaming.

Session 3: Imagining and dreaming

Introduction

As discussed in Session 1 and 2, an appreciative approach to inquiry adopts a stance where lived experiences, either individual or collective, are foregrounded throughout the process of inquiry, starting with the stories of current practices that you began to write and collect in Session 2.

In this session, you will use these stories as a stimulus to explore and play with ideas about how things can be different if built from positive practices that already exist. In doing so, it allows us to create an imaginative vision, but one that is grounded in detail from the present.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- understand the role of imagining and dreaming in an appreciative approach to inquiry
- identify elements of existing stories that have potential for creating imagining and dreaming about future practices
- understand how 'pushing outwards' from stories, images, metaphors and representations can open up new ways to imagine differently
- experience some techniques for envisioning different practices.

The session starts by considering what role imagining and dreaming have in inquiry processes.

1 The role of imagining and dreaming in inquiry

> Whenever the future is considered as a pregiven – whether this be as the pure, mechanical repetition of the present, or simply because it 'is what it has to be' – there is no room for utopia, nor therefore for the dream, the option, the decision, or expectancy in the struggle, which is the only way hope exists.
>
> (Freire, 2004, pp. 77–78)

Freire's argument gets to the core of what an appreciative approach aims to do – to imagine and then create a future that is different from the now. By giving space to dreaming, imagining, hoping, we make spaces for thinking and doing in different ways. But, this dreaming and imagining is rooted. It isn't fanciful and fantastical, where somehow we imagine something so wondrous that there is no way to begin to action it. Instead, the dreaming and imagining phase arises from the stories we have told, the practices we find exciting and energising, and so from real-life practices and ideas we can explore.

Watkins and Mohr (2001) argue that change (whether individual or organisational) can only happen at the speed of imagination, while Zandee (2013) argues that 'adventure[s] of imagination … [are] a necessary source of renewal in civilisation' (Whitehead in Zandee, 2013, p. 79). The importance of imagining or dreaming of difference (in practice or ideas) can be individual (where change and difference only involves the individual), but more often it involves collective processes, where sharing in a common imagining or dream of a different future allows everyone involved to work towards that vision.

Therefore, the dreaming phase is a process of 'liberating our collective aspirations' (Bushe, 2007, p. 5). We do this by bringing our different stories together, identifying generative aspects that can form the basis of imagining a different future and then surfacing common values, which can form the basis of action. As noted by Zandee, developing openness to difference, and working towards something yet to be experienced, relies on 'develop[ing] a trustful sense of ensemble that makes us dare to travel further' (Zandee, 2013, p. 80).

Figure 1 Imagine mosaic

Activity 1 Imagining and dreaming a different reality

Allow about 10 minutes

Imagine you are setting up a new nursery, school, college, university, department or team. This new context is fictional, and has no boundaries to what can happen (e.g. no financial restrictions, no set policy agendas etc.). Now think about the focus of your inquiry, which you began to develop in Session 2. Using an empty presentation slide, online whiteboard or large piece of paper, start to create a

collage of images, words or phrases that allow you to dream differently about your inquiry focus.

- What could it be like?
- What would it feel like/sound like?
- What would practices look like?
- What would the resources/environment be like?
- Who would be there?
- What sorts of discussions/decisions would take place?

Discussion

This activity is designed to release you from some of the challenges we face in our contexts on a day-to-day basis. In doing so we can begin to imagine differently, and begin to re-see the ways we currently act, think and respond. Making ourselves more aware of our own practices and why we act in the ways we do, is an important step in allowing ourselves the spaces to imagine and dream as part of appreciative inquiry. One aspect of this awareness, is knowing what narratives and structures around us help maintain the current and why they can be so powerful in framing what we think and do.

In the next section you will start to explore imagining and dreaming.

2 Challenges of imagining and dreaming

We are all socialised into stories and images of practices. Sometimes these stories are stated explicitly (e.g. ‘we have always done it that way’ or ‘we have found they respond better if … ’) and sometimes they are more subtle (e.g. the ways spaces are configured, expectations of what should be valued highly or particular ways of using language that are specific to your context or practice). These narratives can be reinforced through every interaction we have (with people, ideas, materials, spaces), and often as practitioners we have aligned ourselves with these narratives to ensure we and our practices are accepted and valued.

Yet, these narratives, while offering us many positive and important aspects, do come with challenges when undertaking inquiry. A significant challenge is how science has created particular assumptions about research and inquiry, where there is a longing for ‘one true story’, an ultimate truth, which is coherent and neat (Gough, 2010). This notion of ‘one true story’ limits practices of imagining and dreaming, where narratives can feel fixed and immovable, where changes to practices and new ideas often feel very small and larger scale change feels daunting and unmanageable. This aligns with Dey and Mason’s (2018) description of the ‘orthodox social imaginary’ (p. 84), where stories can act as constraints and restrict how far we can imagine and dream differently. An example of this could be the common perception (despite the reality often being very different!) of the teacher at the front of the classroom, with children waiting to ‘absorb’ knowledge that they hear.

Figure 2 Children in a classroom, facing the front, surrounded by boxes of materials

Another challenge, closely linked to ‘orthodox social imaginaries’, is the tension between imagining and real-life pragmatism. Of course, real-life pragmatism is important in the everyday functioning of our contexts, where we need to focus on what we can do and what the boundaries of our current actions are. Yet, an appreciative approach to inquiry asks us to move beyond the ‘right now’ realities, to identify where opportunities exist for different stories and images that can guide our actions. This isn’t to prohibit discussion of the realities as part of the imagining phase, but to see them as a generative part of the

discussions, whereby identifying how systems, processes, expectations, if changed, could open up new ways of thinking and doing.

Reading about these challenges may make you feel that being too close to the inquiry focus, being too invested in processes and systems, or being socialised into the practices and languages of your context, might make dreaming or imagining difficult. But, it is precisely because you understand these narratives and the ways they play out that you are best positioned to move beyond them and bring others with you. The next section will focus on techniques to support this shift towards imagining and dreaming a different future.

3 Being a ‘dreamer’

Imagining and dreaming are not often discussed as part of the repertoire of reflective practices promoted in educational contexts. The following sections will help you approach the stories generated in the immersion phase that you developed in Session 2 in a way that allows you to dream and imagine with them to think of different practices.

3.1 Playing

Can you recall a moment when you have found yourself doodling during a meeting or indulging in a little daydreaming while driving? These are examples of moments when we are ‘playing’ in the sense that we are creating and capturing unformed thoughts. In order to imagine and dream differently, we need to be open to being playful with ideas. The French word for play has a broader definition than in the English language. In French, the word play means to play an instrument and to play as children, but it also means where something ‘has a little play’ in it, where it offers up an opportunity for a bit of movement. The role of playing in inquiry, of seeing what materials, processes, ideas ‘have a little play’ in them, allows us to find where we might move our dreaming or imagining in a slightly different direction. Playing can occur in a number of ways, but may include:

- creative concept-mapping to combine images and words
- combining and recombining to see what happens
- physically playing with different materials and spaces linked to the inquiry to see what can occur
- playing with words/phrases in different ways to create variations.

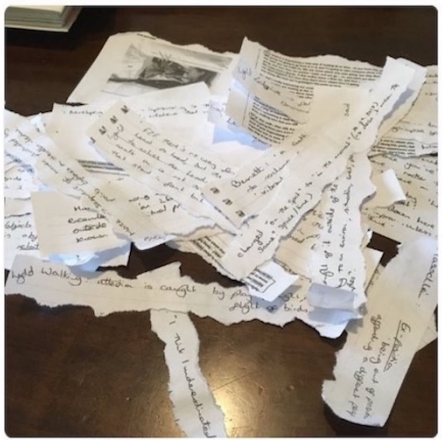


Figure 3 Tearing, cutting, mixing, remixing, arranging, connecting

There are many ways to be playful with the stories from the discovery phase to help us imagine and dream a different future. The next activity will introduce you to one way to focus on imagining and dreaming differently from stories based in current practices. It is designed to distil words, phrases and the images they create into poems that can act as stimuli for thinking beyond the current.

Activity 2 Found poetry

Allow a minimum of 15 minutes

Take your story or stories from the immersion phase (Session 2). If possible, print them out so you can mark directly onto them, but if that’s not possible, you can complete this activity onscreen. Depending on the length of your story/stories, you may choose to focus only on a section and repeat the task several times.

Spend a maximum of five minutes going through the story or part of a story, underlining or highlighting words or phrases that stand out as different from the current or new to you.

By the end of five minutes, you will likely have a collection of words and phrases. Spend time playing with these words and phrases to create a poem-like form. It doesn’t have to rhyme or follow a set rhythm and you can add additional words to help it flow. In writing the poem, you may leave aside some words and phrases, thereby editing your selection down.

Once you have your ‘difference’ poem(s), spend a further ten minutes thinking about what the text creates.

- What new thinking does it inspire?
- What elements of the poem do you want to explore and develop further?
- What new possibilities for practice are suggested?

Having considered the role of playing, you will now go on to consider the role of wondering as part of inquiry.

3.2 Wondering

Wonder is another word that is often overlooked in discussions about inquiry. Yet, wondering brings together what already exists with what does not, affording us an opening into the new (Maclure, 2013, pp. 228–229). Wondering can sometimes be considered a cognitive process. We sit and wonder about what could be. Yet, Maclure argues, it is as much a material and bodily response as it is of the brain, where heightened physical feelings (emotional responses) are significant in how we wonder, and what we wonder about. In many ways, wondering can be considered alongside ‘possibility thinking’ (Burnard *et al.*, 2006), where our wonderings don’t have to all align with each other, but instead we can wonder about multiple possibilities that may or may not be compatible with each other.

Figure 4 Wondering can sometimes be considered a cognitive process

Activity 3 ‘I wonder’

Allow about 10 minutes

For this activity, you may choose to use the poem(s) you wrote in Activity 2, or you may go back to the original story/stories from Session 2. Spend some time re-reading the texts and complete a series of 10–15 statements that start ‘I wonder’. The sentence starter can be used in different ways, including:

- I wonder if ...
- I wonder whether ...
- I wonder how we can …
- I wonder what would happen if ...
- I wonder what it would feel like for …
- I wonder who might …
- I wonder what accessing … might do to ….

Once you have written your statements, identify five that excite or intrigue you the most. Allow yourself to ‘wonder’ about the statements and their implications for a different practice in the future. How do these statements relate to the fictitious context you created a collage about in Activity 1?

Discussion

You may find that your ‘wonder’ statements differ significantly from the collage you created. In that activity we asked you to free yourself of all existing constraints in your context. Doing so allowed you to imagine a radically different future. In Activities 2 and 3, we have asked you to start from your stories about your context and develop new ideas *from* existing strengths. This is an important distinction in appreciative approaches to inquiry, where we are aiming to build from what is already positive and possible, rather than what has sometimes been called ‘blue sky thinking’. This means that we are more likely to be able to make and sustain changes in practice as a result of our inquiry.

It is also worth considering the process of wondering. When do you allow yourself to wonder about issues? It isn’t unusual for us to allow ourselves to wonder, allowing our minds to wander, while we are actively engaging our bodies in something else (walking, driving, cooking, gardening, playing sport). Consider when, as part of inquiry processes, you have time to wonder deeply (a difficult task as a busy educator).

We will now go on to consider the role of hope within an appreciative approach to inquiry.

3.3 Hoping

Bushe (2007) draws a direct relationship between hope and the ability to generate a different future, commenting that ‘it is impossible to get people to collectively act to change the future if they don’t have hope [which] to some extent … is born out of discovering … share[d] common images of a better team, organisation or world’ (p. 3). McGowan and Felten (2021), writing about hope in Higher Education, propose that hope is reliant on:

- a sense of personal agency (‘I can change in meaningful ways despite the systems and structures constraining me’)
- a vision of possible pathways (‘I see specific and purposeful steps I can take’).

This hope, they argue, isn’t naïve or fanciful, but it is ‘critical hope’, which Bozalek *et al*. define as ‘an action-oriented response to contemporary despair’ (in McGowan and Felten, 2021, p. 2). It is worth noting again here the role of emotional responses. Despair is a powerful emotion, but here it is being used to instigate positive action through being hopeful.

Figure 5 Hopeful seedling growing among metal pipes

Bushe, McGowan and Felten’s arguments not only ask us to be hopeful in inquiry but also are a persuasive argument as to why we, as inquirers, need to develop powerful stories of transformation to bring colleagues and peers along with us. This is something we will explore in Sessions 4 and 5.

Activity 4 Being hopeful

Consider your inquiry topic and respond to the following statements:

a. I can change in meaningful ways despite the systems and structures constraining me. *Yes or No?*

b. I see specific and purposeful steps I can take. *Yes or No?*

Discussion

If you answered no to either of these questions, spend some time either individually or as a group identifying what would need to change to allow you to be hopeful for the future. Remember, if there is one thing blocking your way that you cannot change, this may involve being imaginative about the steps you can take to build on your positive, existing practices.

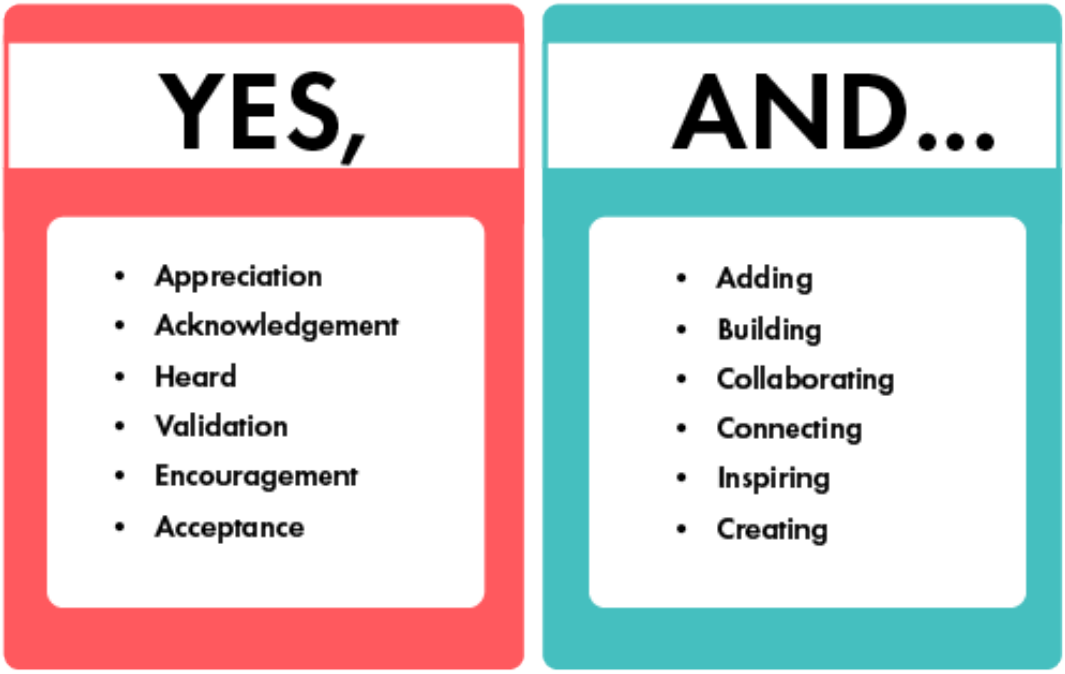
In the next section you consider the role of courage and being encouraging within appreciative inquiry.

3.4 Courage and encouraging

Courage and being encouraging are central to dreaming and imagining differently, where thinking and doing differently can feel uncomfortable and potentially isolating as we move away from 'orthodox social imaginaries' (Dey and Mason, 2018). We, by the virtue of imagining and dreaming, expose ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable, as at this point we have no evidence or formulated plan to understand whether what we are dreaming of is possible or effective. As Dey and Mason state, by creating possible different worlds we are by implication, critiquing the present, where we continue to expose the orthodoxies and stories that are currently told.

In the face of these critiques and challenges, we have to have courage and be encouraging of others who we are inquiring with to not feel overwhelmed by the tensions, dissonances and vulnerabilities that this causes. It is here in these tensions and critiques we can sometimes find the most powerful imaginings of future practices.

'Yes, and … ' is a theatre improvisation technique that allows improvised action to continuously build and develop, rather than being blocked. We often find ideas and discussions blocked with the phrase 'Yes, but … ' or 'No, but … '. 'Yes, and … ' is a way of being courageous and encouraging, as it stops us retreating into problematising, which, although comforting, can limit our ability to dream differently. The power of 'Yes, and … ' can be seen in Figure 6.



Figures 6 The 'Yes, and …' theatre technique

In your inquiry, you may be working in an inquiry team or you may be working with a range of stakeholders as part of your inquiries. In either case, the following activity can support collective imagining and dreaming. The particular process outlined below can be adapted as suitable for your context and the nature of your collaborations.

Activity 5 Collective courage activity

Allow up to 1 hour

Gather your inquiry team, or a group of stakeholders or participants, together. If there are lots of you, you may want to break this down into smaller groups working in parallel. The purpose of this activity is to imagine and dream collectively, to think what exciting, innovative and interesting developments might be made in this area. One person in each group should concept map the emerging conversations from the group.

Ideally, everyone in the conversation will have had a chance to write stories (as in Activity 7 in Session 2) and have begun to play with them a little.

- One person will read their story out loud to the group.
- As the story is spoken, the rest of the group should identify aspects that interest and excite them.
- After the story reading is finished, the storyteller should start the conversation with the sentence: 'One aspect of my story that I find full of possibilities for thinking about the future is … '
- Once this starting point has been spoken, the rest of the group can then join in with the conversation using 'Yes, and … ' statements, to build ideas, images and thinking from this initial stimulus.
- When the building comes to a natural conclusion, either a different aspect of that story can be selected to restart the conversation or someone else can read their story out.

If at any point someone blocks by saying 'Yes, but … ', or 'No, but … ', the group should acknowledge the 'but', and ask the speaker to flip the statement into a 'Yes, and … ' or should collectively agree to note that issue separately to discuss at a later time. This is not to discount challenges, but to recognise the purpose of this part of the process is to imagine.

Discussion

You may well find this process a little unnatural to start with, where conversation might feel quite stilted. This is to be expected as the first few times you undertake 'yes, and' conversations you will be focusing as much attention on remembering the protocols as on the content being discussed. Equally, you may find with certain groups of staff that it is easier to initially build in moments for them to write yes, and responses before speaking them. Over time you will begin to find it easier to build generatively in fluid conversation, making the group develop a more appreciative, generative stance to all aspects of professional learning.

Through approaching our immersing stories using play, wonder, hope and encouraging, we may well already be beginning to imagine and dream about future practices. But, as already discussed in Section 3, imagining differently can be a difficult process, and one which potentially can make us feel vulnerable as we critique the orthodoxies of our contexts. This can be especially felt when collaborating in imagining activities, where differences and divergences can surface.

Bushe (2013) states that he has shifted his view of the dream (imagining) phase of appreciative inquiry from a space of finding similarities in what people dream of to

recognising the generative power of differentiation between voices. He argues that it is through difference and divergence that ‘a more complex, well-adapted coherence can emerge’ (p. 105–106). In doing so, you are building a more solid foundation from which you can collectively generate different ways forward.

4 Doing imaginative inquiries

Playing, wondering, hoping, encouraging are all ways you can *be.* They provide you with ways you can think about how you *act* in inquiry. But, to help you imagine and dream differently, you may also need to deliberately change what you do as an inquirer, including how you see, read and respond to the inquiry materials, in this case the stories you have collated and written.

One way of thinking about 'doing' differently is to consider your inquiries as a process of 'diffracting' your perspective, to help you see and respond in multiple ways in order to generate new thinking and doing. Each of the activities that follow is designed to help you 'diffract' your stories from Session 2, and in doing so, open up the plethora of different opportunities that come from doing imaginative inquiry, starting by considering the role of metaphor.

4.1 Generating metaphors

Bushe (2013) explains the power of metaphors in challenging existing assumptions that underpin cultures of organisations and professions; recognising aspects of practice that are taken for granted; highlighting aspects that may otherwise be overlooked; and changing how people think about and see their practices. Through the writing activities you have undertaken so far, you may have become more aware of dominant metaphors that structure the current, whether this is perceptions of what a practitioner does (e.g. practitioner as juggler) or perceptions of how policy or initiatives work in practice (e.g. policy as tour guide, or initiative as jigsaw). It may be that metaphors haven't been surfaced at all, but you may have hunches about what sort of metaphors may be at work even if not explicit. Alternatively, you may not have thought about how metaphors work in your context at all.

By deliberately playing with different metaphors, ones that are different from those currently considered, you can gain a new perspective through 'frame restructuring' (Zandee, 2013), where you can 'challenge the taken-for-granted and invite new inquiry' (p. 75). To reframe your stories, and generate new perspectives, you can ask the question: 'What if X practice was considered with Y metaphor?' An example of this is shown in the case study.

Case study: Reframing practitioner wellbeing during Covid-19

In a session exploring practitioner wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, many metaphors were shared in discussion of what it had been like as schools, nurseries and colleges went online. Key metaphors were 'firefighting' and 'sinking', where the majority of their responses were focused on the struggles they had experienced and the impact these had had on staff.

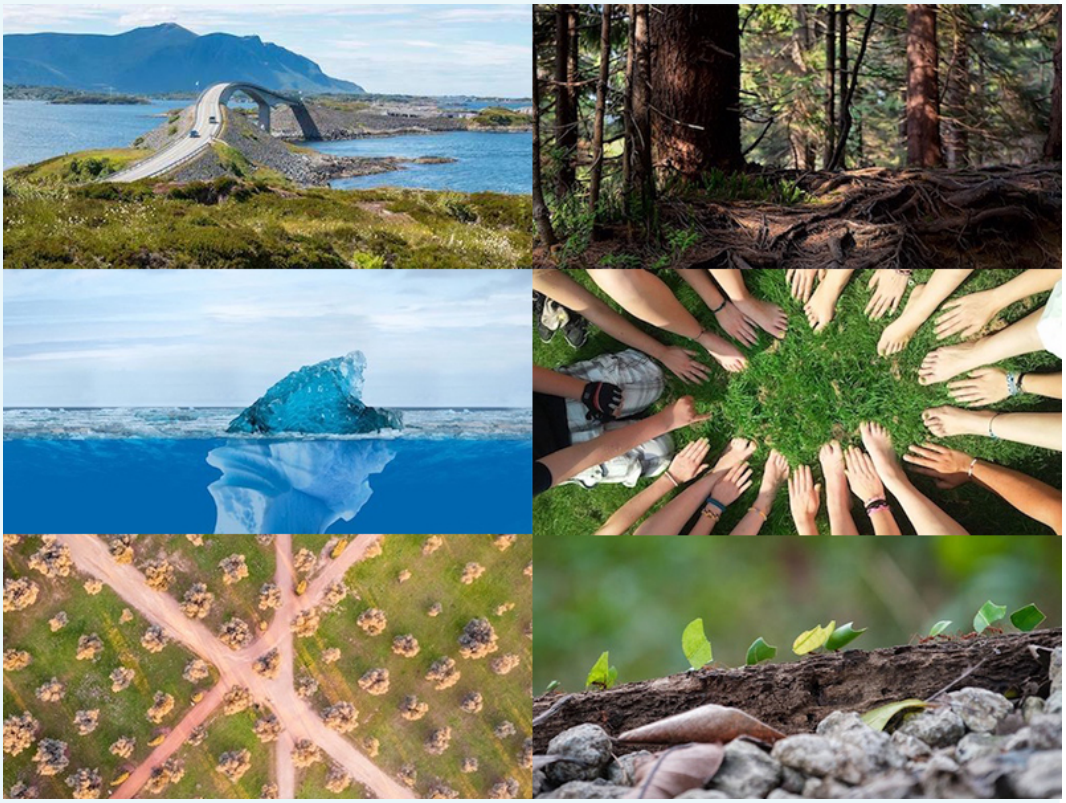
In the second session, the group started exploring a 'rivers' metaphor, using the images of water from their previous metaphors, but thinking about water in a different way. Through exploring images of rivers at different stages and in different conditions, the group deepened their stories, identifying critical moments where the nature of the river (as their journey through Covid) changed. This brought in more moments of serenity, reflection, stillness and some deeper thoughts about particularly stormy sections of the river, all of which provided details and possibilities for the group to generate ideas with for practices they wanted to maintain or develop.

Activity 6 Developing a metaphorical ‘reframing’ for your inquiry

Allow about 20 minutes

Either individually or in your inquiry team, spend time thinking with one or more of the following images to consider how different metaphors might help you to imagine further about your inquiry focus.

- How do they relate to your inquiry topic?
- What other images, languages, ideas do they generate about your inquiry?



Figures 7–12 Metaphor stimuli images

Discussion

In completing this task you may have found you could find quite a simplistic connection between the main focus of the image and your inquiry, whether it was bridges, roots, the hidden iceberg beneath what’s seen, the collective making of the hands, the paths or the ants collaborative task. However, spending more time with your chosen image, you may have found you could ‘push outwards’ from that original quick response to generate some deeper connections, for example, whether the paths were man-made or paths of desire, or how the ants are all marching in a tight formation along the branch. If you now feel you can return to your image again to go even deeper, asking different questions about the connectedness of the image to your inquiry topic, then spend another few minutes before moving on.

In thinking abut metaphors, the last activity drew heavily on images. The next section considers the role images can have in their own right as generating appreciative inquiries.

4.2 Generating images

Images, whether through descriptions or actual visuals, are a really important part of storytelling. Sometimes these images are so strong that they frame how we act and see, becoming cliches that we can unknowingly embody. A classic example is the image of ‘teacher’ as positioned to the front of a class, using a board to impart knowledge, which can often be the reference point for how student teachers begin to understand their role. So, using different images or even creating (through artwork or photography) different images of future practices ‘intentionally generates new thinking and doing as a basis for moving toward the future’ (Watkins, Mohr and Ralph, 2011, p. 43).

Activity 7 Finding new images

Allow a minimum of 20 minutes

- Act as a photographer/videographer: Who is already doing something different that interests you? What practices are you engaged in that you think are interesting or challenge commonly held images of practices?
- Act as a practice finder: Who is writing/sharing/talking about practices in a different way? What images are they using to support their thinking (remembering they may be describing images with words rather than showing)? You may find these practices via social media, blogs, magazine articles or via colleagues.
- Review your collection of photos and videos. How do they help you imagine aspects of these practices that could be built on or developed?

You will now go on to consider what emerging ideas, exciting opportunities or practices you wish to explore more, and take into the rest of this course.

5 Taking our imaginings with us

You have engaged in a series of activities, all designed to stimulate spaces for imagining and dreaming. As you imagine and dream, you become aware of different types of story about your inquiry, whether through different types of language, metaphor, image or practices. You begin to take a view on what feels really important to you, what is exciting and interesting, and what has potential. In order to take these ideas and feelings into the innovation session of this course, you will now, either individually or as a team, complete an activity to capture key aspects to take with you into Session 4.

Activity 8 New emerging stories

Allow a minimum of 20 minutes

For this task, you will imagine yourself in the future. Write a story using the following scenario. If you are writing together, you may want to do this as a discussion with one person writing.

In five years' time, you are sat in the audience of a large education conference in which awards are being given out for innovative and impactful practices. Your name (s) are called – you have won for the work you have done on your inquiry project.

As part of the acceptance speech, you are asked to tell the story of your inquiry. What have you done, who has been involved, why has it been as successful as it has?

Discussion

At this point in the course, you may find that you haven't written about detailed specifics of the actions you have taken and the results you hope to have achieved, which we will discuss later in the course. Instead you may have written more about the principles and values behind what you hope to achieve and some of the innovative or interesting practice or ways of thinking about your inquiry topic that will form the basis of your work.

This imaginative activity has hopefully captured the key ideas and opportunities you have now begun to identify. These will be important in the next session.

6 Summary of Session 3

This session of the free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, identified the importance of imagining and dreaming for an appreciative approach to inquiry. It has also discussed some of the challenges of imagining differently, where orthodox social imaginaries can feel very strong to deviate from. But, by playing, wondering, hoping and encouraging, you can create spaces to think and do beyond the current. In helping you develop these spaces, you explored how deterritorialisation, metaphor, image and language can support you in starting to write a different story of future practice.

In the next section you will begin to plan how you can use the imagining and dreaming you have done in this session into an inquiry project with real-life actions.

Session 4: Innovating and designing

Introduction

In the last session, you spent some time exploring different ways of imagining differently, ending with the (co-)construction of a different story of future practice based on your area of inquiry. In this session, you will use this story as a basis for planning some of the ways in which this imagined future might become a reality. At this stage in the appreciative inquiry process, you will find that some concrete actions begin to emerge, but it is important not to lose sight of the often improvised and generative nature of this kind of inquiry. We hope that by now you will have begun to recognise that we enter inquiry as 'wide-eyed explorers without final destination' (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987, p. 164). This is as important now as at any other point in the inquiry; you will have a clear sense of your *direction* of travel, but the exact *destination* will continue to 'emerge from the context in unanticipated and unpredictable ways' (Boud and Hager, 2012, p. 23).

Figure 1 Hot air balloons: going with the flow

This is why we have included the word ‘innovating’ in the title of this session: as we design for a different future, the need to remain creative and open to new and unexpected possibilities is vital.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- take a creative and improvisational approach to planning for change
- identify key themes in stories of future practice that will be the focus of the innovating and designing phase
- develop ideas and strategies for moving forwards
- create an action plan to guide the process of change.

This session starts by thinking about common approaches to planning and their relationship, or not, to an appreciative approach.

1 Planning re-imagined

Action planning for a project tends to follow a structured and often linear path. Whilst there are occasions on which this can work well, you may have already reflected that appreciative inquiry might require different approaches to thinking and planning for new possibilities. In the next activity you will consider this idea further.

Activity 1 Action planning 101

Allow about 10 minutes

Do a web search for 'action planning templates' and spend some time browsing the examples you find.

- What do you notice about the way these are formatted?
- What kinds of information do these templates expect to be captured in an action plan?

Discussion

It is likely that the templates you have discovered are largely formatted as tables for completion. Key information includes things like core objectives, specific tasks, success criteria, resources and timeframes. The implication here is that there will be a solution that 'fits' the issue, rather than allowing for the development of unanticipated outcomes.

You may also have identified that the templates focused on individual rather than collective leadership. Clearly, all of these elements have an important role to play in delivering tangible change, but the linear, tabulated format of the plan as a whole sits less comfortably with the more improvised and generative approach at the heart of appreciative inquiry.

One way to ensure that the process of designing for change in your inquiry maintains the momentum of the appreciative inquiry process is to pause for a moment and recall some of the key characteristics of the approach, considering how they might influence the phase that we have called 'Innovating and designing'. For example, you have explored the ways in which an appreciative inquiry can be a site of co-construction where new possibilities and futures are collectively imagined. You have also seen the value of story in imagining possible new practices and you have used a range of techniques to generate the kinds of creative and critical thinking that enables different ways of thinking to emerge for further exploration and action (Ghaye *et al*., 2008). In the rest of this session, you will approach the task of innovation and design by drawing on these same characteristics.

Part of the challenge is to bring together the stories, images, metaphors and more that have been generated in the 'Immersing and appreciating' (Session 2) and 'Imagining and dreaming' (Session 3) phases of your inquiry in ways that can begin to generate the kinds

of commitments and actions that will create new practices. To do this, argue Watkins, Mohr and Keely (2011), we need to overcome our ‘limited ability to realise that what we see in parts is always some small piece of a larger whole, and that it is our choice about whether to see the part or to embrace the whole’ (p. 75). It is this holistic approach which forms the basis of the next section which returns to consider the stories we are working with.

2 Working with stories of the future

At the end of Session 3, in Activity 8, you produced a story (or stories) of the future and identified some key themes for further exploration. These themes help to set the direction of travel for the next phase of your inquiry – the innovating and designing phase. It's worth reiterating here that, while you may have an idea of your intended destination, the journey there is unlikely to be uncontested and linear. A helpful metaphor may be that of a sports team coach with a game plan.

Figure 2 Game planning

While the intended 'destination' is a win for the team, the gameplan itself will be responsive to the action that unfolds on the field of play, changing and adapting depending on the actions and decisions of others. In the same way, 'practices are … emergent in the sense that the ways they change are not fully specifiable in advance' (Boud and Hager, 2012, p. 23). Any design plan for an imagined future must allow room for further improvisation, changes of direction and emerging new possibilities.

A helpful starting point is the themes that you identified in the stories of the future that you developed at the end of the last session. Each of these themes represents a design element in this next phase of your appreciative inquiry, and we will begin to explore how we can move from these themes into planning for our inquiry in the next section, starting with identifying some provocative propositions to drive our inquiry forward.

2.1 Provocative propositions

In Session 2, you identified a 'positive core' as a stimulus for your inquiry, which involved gathering stories of 'best experiences'. Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2008) refer to this as identifying 'the best of "what gives life"' (p. 162). Importantly, Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) also emphasise the importance of images of possible futures emerging from the positive and concrete examples of the past that have been encountered in the earlier phases of the inquiry.

In Session 3, you explored individual and perhaps collective ideas about ‘what might be’. Creating a ‘provocative proposition’ involves combining these two to craft a ‘compelling picture of how things will be’ when the imagined future is enacted (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008, p. 162).

Activity 2 Laying the foundations

Allow a minimum of 20 minutes

Return to the themes you identified in your individual or collective story at the end of Session 3. These are the foundations from which you will design your planning in this session. For each of these themes:

1. Return to the stories, metaphors and images that you have collected throughout the process so far. Where do you find material that relates to your chosen theme? As you explore these materials, make notes of the key words that emerge that best represent the ‘positive core’ of this particular theme.
2. Either individually or collaboratively, take some time to reflect on these words, reviewing and refining them until you are satisfied that they capture the essence of the theme. Keep these words to hand for the next activity.

Discussion

The key words that you have collected have emerged from activities in which you have honed your ‘appreciative gaze’ and explored positive possibilities for the future. The following case study is an example in which this kind of appreciative inquiry forms the basis of a collaborative approach to establishing a writing community in a university.

Case study: core themes of the innovating and designing phase

The inquiry was driven by a desire and commitment among a small group of academics to create a work culture in which time for writing and research was an integral part of their academic work on a regular basis. In the ‘Immersing and appreciating’ phase of the inquiry, participants collected images, poems and stories of occasions on which they had been able to write without hindrance, enabling them to identify a ‘positive core’ for their inquiry: ‘building a strong writing culture in our university’. The collection of words, phrases and images that emerged in the ‘Imagining and dreaming’ phase of the inquiry helped to identify three core themes to be worked on in the ‘Innovating and designing phase’:

- the writing space
- creating time
- developing writing confidence and competence.

For each of these themes, the group gathered, reviewed and refined a set of words that best represented each theme in turn. To these they added an image that captured the essence of the ‘positive core’ of each theme. For example, here is the representation of the first theme, ‘the writing space’:

- communal
- shared
- nourishing
- sociable
- purposeful
- creative
- dialogue
- reflection

Figure 3 The kitchen table

The metaphor that resonated most with the group in the stories and metaphors they shared was the idea of sitting around a kitchen table, writing and chatting together in a sociable, yet purposeful, manner. This reflected the idea of the kitchen as the hub of the home, a sociable and creative space where things of value are produced.

Drawing on the combination of the image and accompanying words, the group produced a provocative proposition that would underpin the design phase in relation to 'the writing space':

The writing space will be one in which participants can write individually but in community with others. It will be a space where creativity and dialogue are actively encouraged in ways that nourish and encourage the writing of one another.

Activity 3 Creating provocative propositions

Allow about 15 minutes

Using the words that you collected in the second part of Activity 2, can you write a 'provocative proposition' that best captures an 'imagined future' that will underpin the next part of the appreciative inquiry process?

You may have completed Activity 3 individually or in collaboration with others. Either way, your provocative proposition should capture a sense of excitement and anticipation about what might be possible that gives momentum to the planning process. These provocation propositions will form the basis for thinking about how you can actively design for inquiry in the next section.

3 Finding the design elements

At this point in your inquiry, you will begin to identify what needs to happen to transform the imagined future that you have captured in your provocative proposition into a reality. Perhaps what follows will appear more familiar to you than some of what has gone before – there will be some concrete outcomes as a result of the activities in this section that will have emerged from an appreciative climate. However, this phase should retain some of the creative flair that has characterised the earlier phases of the inquiry. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) suggest framing the activities in this phase with the question: What would [the inquiry focus] look like if it were designed in every way possible to maximise the possibilities of the positive core and enable the accelerated realisation of our dreams?

Moving towards some concrete outcomes requires identifying the core elements of the provocative proposition that need to be designed if the imagined future is to be reached. One way to maintain both creativity and momentum at this point in the process, either individually or collectively, is to generate a thought cloud with as many ideas as possible for each of the design elements you have identified. Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros (2008, p. 172) suggest some helpful rules for this kind of brainstorm:

- defer judgement – don't dismiss any ideas
- encourage wild ideas – be radical
- build on the ideas of others; don't use *buts*; use only *ands*
- stay focused on the topic
- hold one conversation at a time
- be visual
- go for quantity.

These 'rules' maintain the sense of generativity and improvisation that are at the core of appreciative inquiry, while creating a climate in which some concrete actions and strategies can emerge.

Activity 4 Provocative themes

Allow about 5 minutes

Look again at the provocative proposition that emerged in relation to the writing community that was introduced in Activity 3. Can you highlight three phrases that might form the core elements of the design of this community?

The writing space will be one in which participants can write individually but in community with others. It will be a space where creativity and dialogue are actively encouraged in ways that nourish and encourage the writing of one another.

Discussion

The writing space will be one in which participants can write **individually but in community** with others. It will be a space where **creativity and dialogue** are actively encouraged in ways that **nourish and encourage** the writing of one another.

The words that you highlighted in the previous activity are the three core elements the group identified and below is an example of the kind of thought cloud that might emerge from just one of these: writing individually but in community. It captures some concrete commitments that will characterise the writing community and will underpin the community's overall design.

Figure 4 Writing individually but in community: a thought cloud

The group used the thought cloud to consider what activities might best capture these commitments so that the community reflected the characteristics of the imagined future. Their ideas included:

- identifying a space where everyone can be together, but break out into other spaces to write individually
- beginning each session with a creative writing task
- sharing individual writing targets at the start of the session and reporting on progress at the end
- providing opportunities for individuals to share extracts of their writing and to request feedback on a specific aspect
- providing opportunities for colleagues to put a writing challenge 'on the table' and collaboratively exploring positive ways forward.

These initial ideas both capture the heart of the provocative proposition and begin to shape the ways in which the writing community might operate in practice. Each one constitutes a *design statement* and can form a basis for action in the next phase of the inquiry.

Activity 5 Writing design statements

Allow about 15 minutes

This activity will help you to develop your own design statements from the proposition that you wrote in Activity 3, so make sure you have that statement to hand.

a. Highlight up to three core elements that should be addressed in the design phase (as was modelled in Activity 4)
b. Create a thought cloud similar to the example in Figure 4 to identify concrete actions that might be taken to move towards your imagined future.

The next section will help us move from thinking about finding the design elements from our stories to thinking about how we can act upon these by creating the conditions we need for our inquiry.

4 Moving towards an imagined future

The next phase of the appreciative inquiry process is to begin to put some plans into action. One way of doing this would be to use a basic model of change management in which goals (or design statements) are agreed and team(s) are charged with the task of planning for implementation. But, in an appreciative inquiry approach, the need to retain a spirit of improvisation and generativity requires a different way of thinking. This involves making a clear distinction between *planning the steps* and *creating the conditions* for change. Bushe and Kassam (2005) demonstrate that lasting transformation is more likely when improvisation is a characteristic of the action phase.

Creating appreciative cultures in which generative actions are possible can be a challenging proposition, but Bushe (2007) identifies four key principles that might reflect such a culture:

1. **Collective agreement** refers to the important role of the immersing and dreaming phases in building understanding and ownership of the inquiry focus.
2. **Authorised action** involves ensuring that everyone has the authority to take actions that will move things forward in the agreed direction of travel.
3. **Creating commitments** involves creating clear opportunities for everyone to take an initial action that commits them to the process of change.
4. **'Tracking and fanning'** requires us to 'look for any and all acts that move the organisation in the desired direction and find ways to support and amplify those efforts' (p. 6).

These principles offer a stark contrast to the more 'top-down' approach to managing change that we might be most familiar with. Collective agreement about a desired future reality emerges from the earliest phases of an appreciative inquiry. What Bushe and Kassam (2005) establish is the importance of maintaining generativity in the innovation and design phase. This involves creating a climate where groups and individuals are able to take action without the need to resort to committees, because a shared commitment and understanding enables movement towards the envisaged new reality. This allows for emergent and improvisatory action that remains responsive to the realities, rather than working towards a set of pre-determined, fixed goals.

Such an approach reflects Holman's (2010, 2013) work on how scientific research on complex adaptive systems can be applied to organisational development. As a result she encourages us to embrace 'nature's way of changing' (Holman 2013, p. 19) which involves us in working with complexity, disruption and messiness which emerge from change processes. In practice, this means that, instead of restraining and resisting disturbance, it can be welcomed and used in a creative dance with order to find emergent opportunities when inquiry meets real life. Plans and fixed outcomes can be held lightly, focusing instead on intentions and pursuing the possibilities that seem to lead most positively towards the desired future.

Activity 6 Creating the conditions for action

Allow about 15 minutes

Instead of creating an action plan, which can feel fixed, we are going to create a 'gameplan' to highlight the conditions we need for acting towards our positive future. Either use one of the example gameplan templates below (Figures 5 and 6) or devise your own format. Avoid using tables in your document and make it as inviting

and easy to engage with as possible, as this is going to be used as a poster that you can display or keep close throughout your inquiry actions.

Simple is often best!

To help you, use the following prompts:

- Write down as simply as you can what you are aiming for. This may come from your provocative proposition in Activity 3.
- Note down what initial step you (or each of you) are going to commit to taking.
- Describe what you hope or imagine your future practices will look, sound and feel like in a few words.
- What environments, resources, materials do you need to be able to take action?
- What is already in place to support you?
- What permissions or support do you need and from whom, to be able to act, respond and/or improvise as the inquiry proceeds?
- Who else needs to be involved in the action to make it successful?
- How will you know if things are moving forwards?
- How will you evidence what happens as a result?

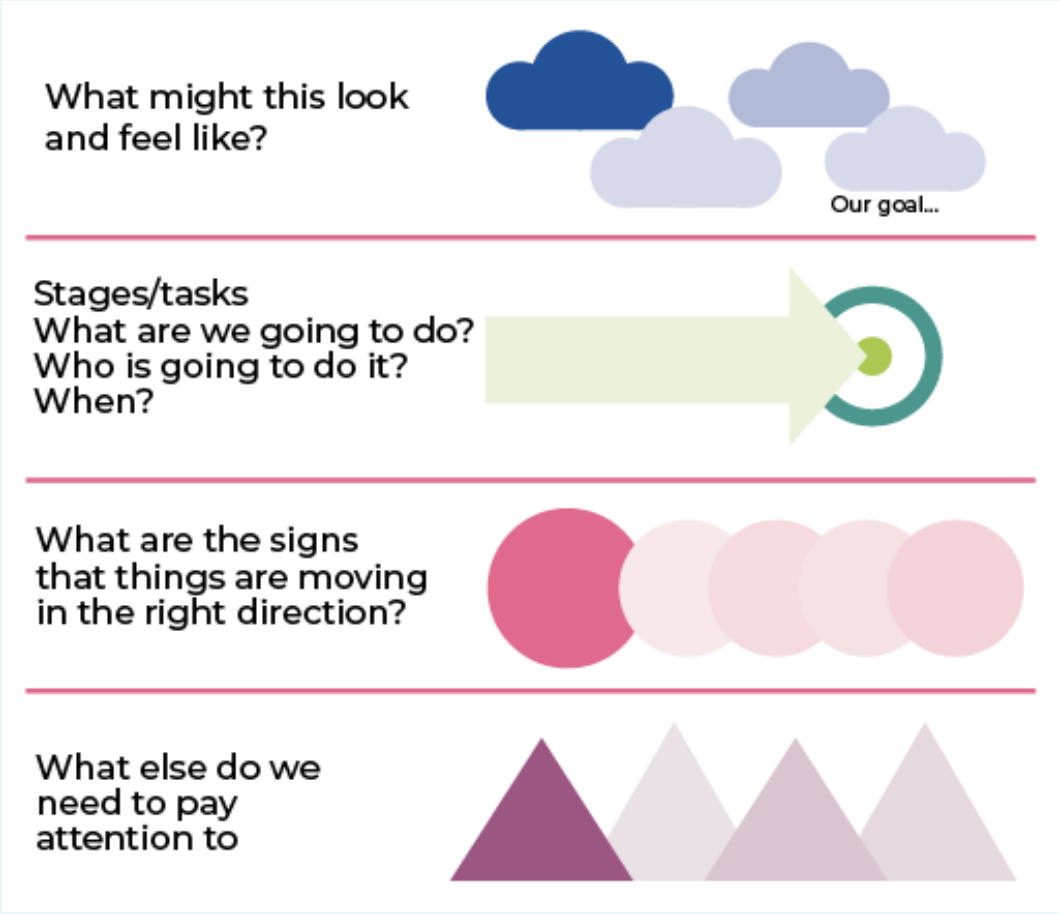


Figure 5 Possible gameplan 1

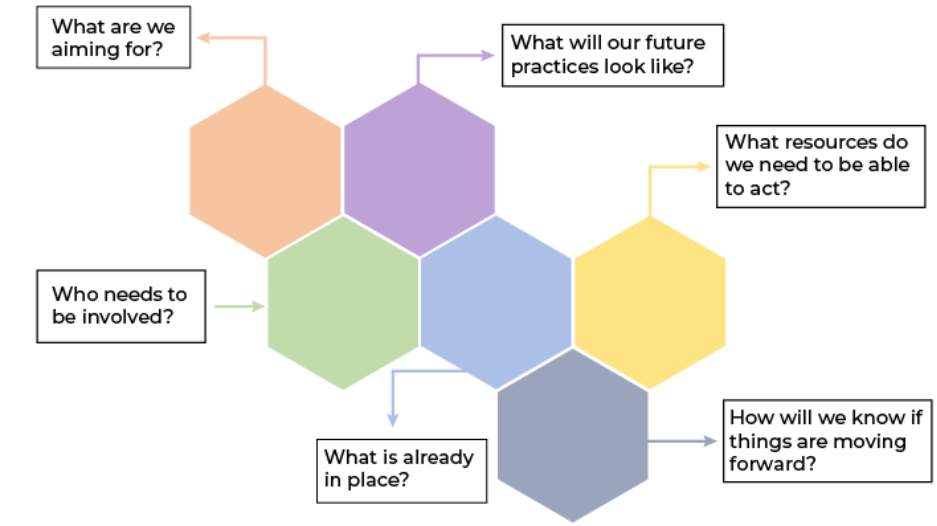


Figure 6 Possible gameplan 2

Whilst your 'gameplan' will have some specific and quite concrete actions, it is important to remember that you are not trying to capture everything that will happen – you need to leave space for responding and improvising to what happens along the way, focusing instead on the conditions we need for us to act.

Discussion

You may have found the process of creating a gameplan challenging as you may have realised that you don't have the ideal conditions in place for an appreciative inquiry to occur. In some ways this is always true of inquiry processes and part of making inquiry work is creating the best possible conditions that you can and acknowledging where conditions could be better. Completing this activity has hopefully made you aware of what you might be able to put in place to create the best possible conditions you can.

An important aspect of planning for and enacting inquiry is how we ensure we are acting ethically in collaboration. The next section will explore what this means in practice.

4.1 Collaborative ethical action

Several authors argue that an appreciative approach to inquiry is rooted in ethically responsive forms of research and change (Marchi, 2011; Ghaye *et al.*, 2008; Scott and Armstrong, 2019). They highlight how the approach:

- is rooted in personal and collective storytelling
- builds positively and generatively from practices that already exist
- is responsive and contingent on local contexts
- develops in relationships with others, encompassing multiple perspectives and opinions
- is attentive to what is happening and how people feel about it.

We want to highlight a specific aspect of ethical inquiry, the role of collaboration, to help you consider in more depth the ethical stance of your own inquiry project.

Throughout this course you may be working in inquiry teams, rather than individually. Whether this is the case or not, sustaining ethical relationships with others, through trust, respect and attentive listening is a fundamental feature of an appreciative approach (Ghaye *et al*., 2008; Marchi, 2011). As Marchi acknowledges, an appreciative approach to inquiry, in its most powerful form, challenges and deconstructs the 'us-them' definition between peers, institutions and employees, policy and practice (p. 190), where voices and practices that have potential to be built from can arise from anywhere within our complex and often hierarchical systems. Marchi describes how this 'gives rise to decision-making micro-processes and actions that will foster greater reciprocity within and between the different systems' in what he describes as 'situation-based ethics' (2011, p. 190–191). This 'can do', empowering attitude to making positive change through inquiry is enacted through allowing lots of people to have a say (through the storytelling phase) and influence the direction of the inquiry (Ghaye *et al*., 2008, p. 368).

Figure 7 Playing with sticky notes

Underpinning collaborative ethical action is what Rosenberg (2010) terms ethical characteristics and behaviours. Drawing on Quinn, Rosenberg argues that 'all action intrinsically arises from who we are and what we see around us … [which] depends on our own state of being [and] self-awareness' (Rosenberg 2010, p. 16). This course embeds such ethical action into and throughout the course, responding to the very nature of an appreciative approach, where we have emphasised the following characteristics:

- **attentiveness to stories**, how they are constructed, how they work in your context, what language, metaphors and images they draw on
- **attentiveness to practices** that are already there, practices that emerge during inquiry, practices that are challenged by the inquiry processes

- **responsiveness** to differences between stories and different people's perspectives, responsiveness to emergent issues and to opportunities that present themselves
- **creativity**, to allow ourselves spaces to re-think, re-see, re-consider, moving ourselves beyond our own perspectives or dominant assumptions and beliefs.

Activity 7 Acting ethically

Allow about 20 minutes

Hold a conversation with your inquiry team, or with a peer, and explore what it means to be attentive, responsive and creative in your collaborations. Reflecting on your gameplan poster from Activity 6, draw a concept map with the words 'acting ethically' in the middle. Using words and images, respond to the question: How can you ensure that you act ethically in your ongoing inquiries?

Keep your concept map safe as you may find it useful later if you are writing or talking about ethics when sharing your project with others.

Collaborating ethically will vary depending on who you are collaborating with and how you are collaborating. Issues of power, control, shared responsibility and decision-making processes may all have appeared in your concept map. It is important to be attentive to these issues, review them regularly and explicitly discuss ethics as part of your ongoing inquiry processes.

For more information on ethical research in educational contexts you may be interested in the OpenLearn course *Becoming an ethical researcher*.

5 Summary of Session 4

This session has focused on notions of planning, where we leave spaces and the conditions necessary to take responsive, improvised action as needed. To do this, you have worked together to create provocative propositions, drawing from the immersing and imagining work you did in Sessions 2 and 3. These propositions create the basis of a shared understanding of what is being aimed for.

You have then thought about the design elements of these propositions, identifying what sorts of actions could be taken to move you towards that vision of practice. Finally, you have thought about the conditions necessary for such action to be taken. You will have created a gameplan to set the conditions and thought about what it means to take ethical action, setting you up to build towards your imagined future.

Session 5: Re-immersing and delivering

Introduction

Throughout the sessions, this course has encouraged you to consider an appreciative approach to inquiry, not as a linear progression, a step-by-step process, but as a messy, creative, improvisational process. So, although you are now reading Session 5, which is about re-immersing ourselves in our new realities once actions have been taken, you may well have found that actions, ideas or practices have already started to change as a result of your inquiry. In this way, evaluation doesn't only happen at the end, we don't suddenly emerge into a new practice, but we 'live' with and through our inquiry projects as they develop.

This session acts as a 'bringing together' of the threads of this course, sometimes revisiting ideas and activities anew from this slightly different perspective, and sometimes providing framings that you may find useful if you are in the middle of a project or if you are further on.

By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- understand the notion of action within inquiry as praxis, where it is embodied, contingent, improvised, and messily entangled with our 'lived experiences' as educators
- embed ongoing reflection-in-action and collective evaluation throughout inquiry as a process of mapping emerging opportunities for further inquiry
- tell stories of appreciative inquiry in ways that are engaging, clear and meaningful to others, including colleagues, institutional leaders or other stakeholders.

The session will start by considering the relationship between you and your developing views of inquiry.

1 Inquiry as praxis

This course started by considering what is meant by inquiry, which is used as an encompassing term for practitioner research and scholarship. Session 1 began by challenging notions of inquiry as linear, neat and objective. Instead, taking an appreciative approach to inquiry asks us to start from where we are, embedded and enmeshed in our day-to-day practices, where appreciating the current is seen as something positive to build inquiries from.

Appreciative approaches to inquiry are rooted in the idea of 'living with' and 'living through' our inquiries, where we constantly *become,* developing who we are and how we see ourselves, with our projects. This is different to some images and practices of inquiry,

research or scholarship where ‘the project’ is perceived to be contained, inside a box, separate and separated from what surrounds it.

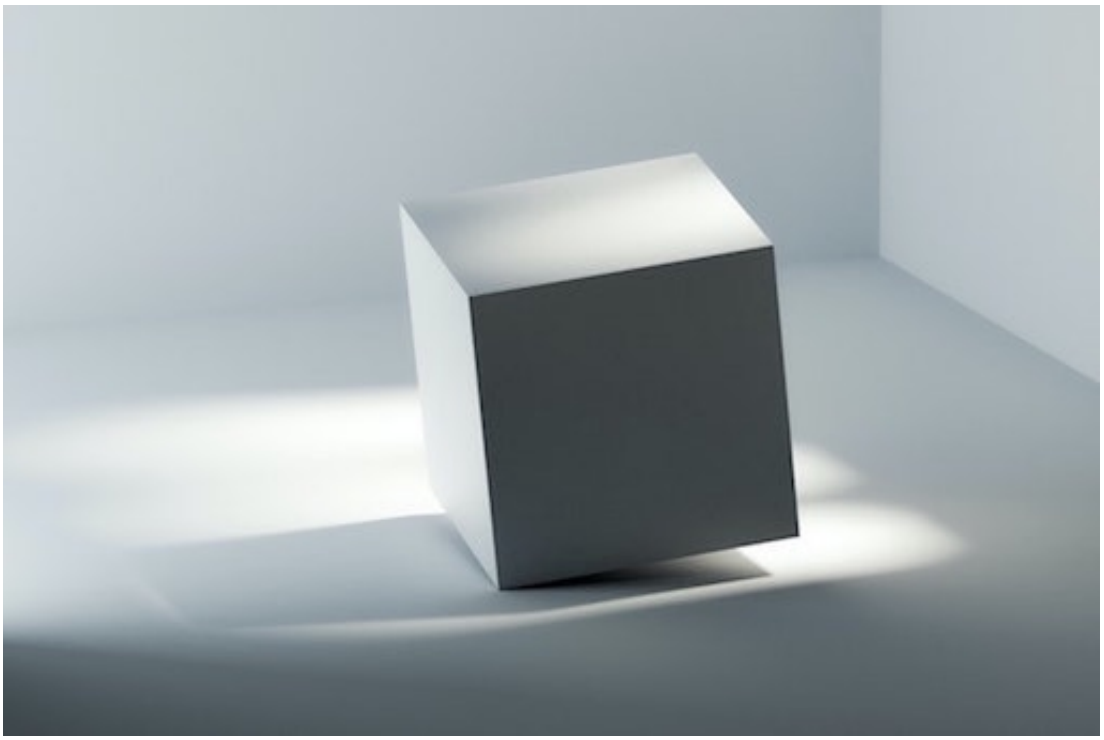


Figure 1 Containing a project

Activity 1 Inquiry and you

Allow about 15 minutes

Reflect on this image of a box (Figure 1), and the notion of inquiry as something contained. Consider how your experiences so far in this course have challenge this image of inquiry. How has inquiry interacted with you and your values, experiences, context, other people and life beyond work? Find an image/metaphor to replace the image of the box and better describe your experiences of inquiry.

You may find that you have returned to metaphors or images you explored in Session 2 of this course, or you may have begun to develop new ones. Whatever the case, your developing sense of what inquiry means to you, including ways of explaining it to others is important. As you may have found yourself, shifting to thinking about an appreciative view of inquiry can take some time, but having images or metaphors to help you tell the story of your relationship with inquiry can help others understand your approach.

The entwining of practice *with* inquiry *with* ourselves *with* our contexts, means that the ‘action’ phase of appreciative inquiry (which, in some traditional research or inquiry, may be presented as ‘contained’), can be considered as a form of praxis.

Praxis is a term not often used in educational contexts, but it has significance for this idea of educational practices *as* lived inquiry. Smith describes praxis as involving ‘not simply action based on reflection. It is action which embodies … a commitment to human

wellbeing and the search for truth, and respect for others. It is the action of people … who are able to act for themselves [and]*s* is always risky" (Smith 1999/2011). Carr and Kemmis (1986) argue that this requires us to "a wise and prudent practical judgement about how to act in *this* situation"'(Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 190). In this way, praxis is performative, generative, 'lived', messy, improvised and ethical, leading us towards theoretical-practical wisdom. In Session 2 we explored the idea of 'Yes, and' as a way of acknowledging what is happening and building from it. Zandee (2013) argues, that by improvising and saying 'yes to the mess' that we create, we embody and live the inquiry, creating spaces for 'new insights and competence' (p.80)

While reading the following vignette, reflect on the ways in which it illustrates inquiry as praxis.

Early Years documentation: inquiry as praxis

A group of Early Years practitioners are inquiring together into how they document children's learning and share this with parents. Several moments during the inquiry process emerge as significant, where the group deliberately experiment with the opportunities for different practices and thinking that they inspire.

- At an outdoor session to which parents were invited, the children did mud painting, wildlife treasure hunts and participated in a storytelling session around a fire pit. After the event, parents, with their child, were asked to complete a brief evaluation comment about the event. The lead practitioner for each child also added a comment. The differences between these three perspectives about what had happened was sometimes revealing, leading to some practitioners having a conversation with parents and children about the session, and leading to additional information being added to the evaluations. As a result, the inquiry team begin to discuss the role of documentation as a mediating tool in home/nursery/child conversations, which could continue being added to, rather than a 'capturing' of evidence.
- One practitioner has his child in a different nursery. As an Instagram user, he began realising just how often he was 'documenting' artwork, writing and drawing tasks, physical play, object and environment explorations at home. He decided to share his Instagram with his child's nursery, who then realised the potential of 'quick image capture' to share learning with parents. This 'quick capture' of images, shared on an iPad as a presentation at pick up, allowed parents to see what had been going on each session, giving the practitioners, children and parents a shared discussion topic, and modelling activities parents could try themselves at home. In response, some parents and children started creating small photo presentations to share back with the nursery about how they had carried on activities from nursery, at home.
- Each child's 'learning folder' was kept in a cupboard and shared with parents at intervals across the year. One incident challenged assumptions about this practice, when a child, having made a picture story of his favourite teddy having a tea party, asked 'Can it go in the box'? His key worker got the folder down and then the child asked, 'What else is in it?' The child then took time, looking at each page, sometimes remembering events or key moments, and discussing them with his key worker and another friend, stood watching. 'Why do you keep these?' came the next question. And then 'Can I take my story home and not put it here?' Discussing this event afterwards with her colleagues, assumptions about who owned the folders, what they were for and how decisions were made about what was put in them were all opened up for consideration. As a result, a

concept map of ideas emerged as to how to make the folders more meaningful for children and parents.

Having read this description the next activity will help you further explore the notion of inquiry as praxis.

Activity 2 Taking risky, improvisational action

Allow about 15 minutes

Consider the descriptions of praxis as risky, embodied, experimental, improvisational, messy and active. How do these words relate to the vignette of the Early Years practitioners? In what ways would you argue this was praxis, not just practice?

Now write the terms risky, embodied, experimental, improvisational, messy and active in your journal and note your responses to the following questions:

a. How do you feel about these descriptions in relation to your inquiry project?
b. What are the challenges of these statements?
c. Do you feel 'free' to inquire in these ways?
d. Do you feel able to say, 'yes to the mess'?
e. What blocks or hurdles have there been (or do you predict might occur) in taking action in these ways?

Discussion

As your inquiry practices develop your relationship with these terms may change. Maybe you feel there are certain spaces or circumstance in which you feel less able to say 'yes to the mess' than others. Maybe you become more confident to describe your inquiry using these terms. Or maybe what feels risky or experimental at the start begins to feel more normal.

This ongoing unfolding of practice-inquiry-self as praxis means that inquiry is ongoing, where it can be considered a stance, as we discussed in Session 1. This means that, often, there is no fixed moment in the process where we stop and say, 'we have finished', reflecting and evaluating on our experiences and writing a 'final report'. Yet, reflection, evaluation and sharing our experiences are all key parts of an appreciative approach to inquiry.

The next sections will consider how the roles of re-immersion (as reflection and evaluation) and storytelling (as reporting) are key features of making appreciative approaches to inquiry continually impactful and meaningful to others. They start by considering how to evaluate an inquiry using an appreciative approach.

2 Is this the dream?

In forms of action inquiry, where detailed action plans are created to instigate changes in practice, there are often clear outcomes set out from the start. In these cases, evaluation often involves assessing how far we have met these outcomes, reflecting backwards on what has happened, what was different than expected and what that means for improving practices. Sometimes evaluations focus on statistical evidence of impact (in education, often on learners' engagement or achievement), where we are often asked to conclude whether we have found a 'solution' to the initially identified 'problem'.

Just as with the other stages of an appreciative approach, some of these assumptions about what inquiry involves, and therefore what evaluation involves, are challenged when we take an appreciative stance.

The next few sections provide a series of considerations about how evaluation can take on a different feel in an appreciative approach to inquiry, starting with considering evaluation as dream-catching.

2.1 Evaluation as dream-catching

Evaluation, as a process of reflection, is often considered to be a finishing action, something that happens at the end, in order to complete the inquiry process. Evaluation is often considered as a review, from beyond the project – a thinking and seeing backwards across what has happened.

Figure 2 Reflecting back

However, in an appreciative approach, where we have continually emphasised both the role of the body and feelings in understanding what is occurring, and the role of improvised, responsive action, which may not have been considered in depth before it happened, there is a much stronger focus on capturing what is experienced and felt *during* or *immediately after* action.

By seeing evaluation as always alongside action, where we are constantly looking to appreciate what is happening and finding ever more practices to explore and build from, final evaluation is informed by deeply experiential and embodied reflections. Figure 3 is an example of capturing dreams in a project about study intensity in Higher Education. As you look at the image, you will be able to see emotions, responses and actions are highlighted as well as questions, issues and connections being made at a variety of levels.

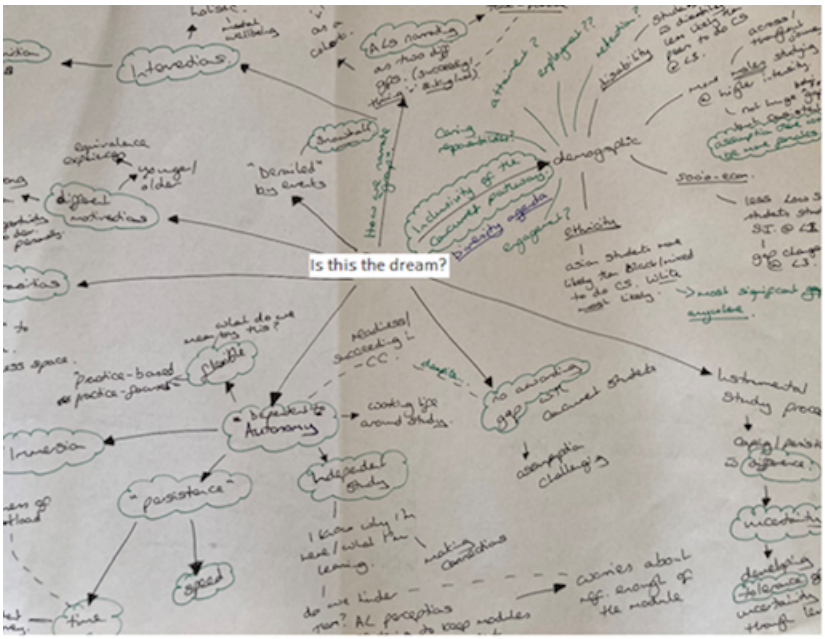


Figure 3 Mapping reflection-in-action: a project on study intensity

The following activity frames how you might capture dreams throughout your inquiries. You may find it helpful to embed this activity as a regular feature of meetings or discussions, where you capture things that feel important, emotional responses and connections as close to events as possible, rather than waiting until an ‘end point’.

Activity 3 Mapping experiences

Allow up to 45 minutes

Individually:

a. Identify an event, experience or sequence of action from your inquiry that you feel has had a significant impact on you.
b. Write ‘Is this the dream?’ on a piece of paper or file. Spend five minutes free writing about the event or experiences, focusing on how you feel, how you responded in the moment (physically, emotionally), how you now feel about the event and how you feel it moved towards the dream set out for the inquiry.
c. Devise a way to capture your responses. This may be on a web-based whiteboard like in Figure 3, or on a large physical whiteboard or poster, or it may be in your journal.

   If you are working in a collaborative inquiry group:

d. Spend a further 15 minutes reading your collective maps and discussing it. Have you chosen similar experiences? Have you learnt about actions taken by peers that you weren't aware of?

Discussion

Engaging in mapping, whether individually or collectively, allows us to make connections between different aspects of our lives and practices. It allows us to capture some of the complexities of educational inquiry, identifying how these might interlink and influence each other. You may have added things to your mapping which was only thought of 'in-the-moment' and you hadn't thought about before, or you may have developed new questions or areas of interest for future inquiry. In this way, even evaluation, is about generating and re-immersing in our practices, which is the focus of the next section.

2.2 Re-immersion

As discussed in Session 4, our appreciative approach means that we won't have established fixed outcomes as part of planning that we can now measure and judge ourselves against. Instead, we need to start from the stories about what has actually occurred, including those aspects that have become important along the way.

In Section 2.1, you focused on your experiences either as an individual or as a group. But, just as you did in Session 2, you also need to continue to immerse yourself in your (new/different/developed) practices and how others are involved or experiencing these practices. In Session 2, you explored the idea of paying attention to others' stories, noticing small details and finding opportunities that are emerging. This attentiveness requires us to carry on collating evidence, appreciating what is beginning to take shape. As with the previous activity, you may find it helpful to embed the following activity at regular intervals throughout your inquiry.

Activity 4 Appreciating what is forming

Allow about 30 minutes

Organise a time where you immerse yourself in your inquiry journal. Take time reading and viewing its contents.

Either individually or as a group, spend time discussing the following questions. Ask one person in the group to concept map/draw or sticky note the conversations to capture key contributions and ideas.

- What's taking shape?
- What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed?
- What's emerging here for you?
- What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard?
- What surprised you? What challenged you?

- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing?
- What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight or discovery so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

(Adapted from Brown and Isaacs, 2005)

Once you have discussed the questions, consider the question, 'Is this the dream?' Has your collective dream changed? Or has it developed further? Make a note of emerging opportunities to extend and develop your inquiry in new directions as a result of your inquiries so far.

Discussion

Do you find it tricky to do some of these activities at particular times of the day, or after particular tasks at work? Noticing when you are receptive and ready to engage in thinking about what is emerging, exciting you and intriguing you is a good way to plan when you might set aside time for inquiry activities. It isn't always easy to do this, but there may be particular moments in our schedules or when we are in particular moods, where we know that appreciating, dreaming and evaluating is more challenging. The next section will consider other conditions which influence our inquiring.

As well as re-immersing as your inquiries dynamically shift, you also need to be responsive to the changing conditions in which your inquiries are taking place, as will be explored next.

2.3 Re-setting

In Session 4, you considered the conditions you needed for action to occur. But, as we have emphasised throughout this course, the improvisatory nature of an appreciative approach to inquiry means that through action (practices) your inquiry will continually morph, requiring you to respond and adapt both your aims and your planning. Session 4 discussed creating the conditions for inquiry and asked you to devise your own poster as a guide for your actions. These conditions will also change as you undertake your enquiries. As with Activities 3 and 4, you may want to embed Activity 5 regularly in your inquiry discussions.

Activity 5 Re-conditions of action

Allow about 30 minutes

Individually or collectively review your 'Conditions for action' poster from Session 4, Activity 6.

Amend your poster to reflect barriers/changes in circumstances/experiences so far that have impacted on the conditions of your inquiry. What do you need to address to ensure you have the necessary conditions to notice, take risks, improvise and map what occurs?

Discussion

Reconditioning can be associated with nourishing, re-establishing or resetting. You may find that such a process is useful at various points of your inquiring as circumstances change, particularly if your enquiry is heavily reliant on a few key conditions being in place that change (e.g. someone leaving the team, a cohort of learners experiencing unexpected challenges, or a change in roles).

A key part of engaging in inquiry is to share the process and the changes that have occurred or are occurring as a result. A heavy weight is put on this in educational contexts where notions of ‘good practice’ or sharing practice are seen as cornerstones of the development of the profession. The next section will begin to explore how to share the story of inquiry with others.

3 Telling our stories to others

Inevitably there will be moments where you want to introduce your inquiry to others. This may be as part of a reporting process during our inquiries, as a way of bringing others into our inquiry practices or to share the project as part of a 'completion' process (although, as we have argued, an appreciative stance to inquiry is difficult to contain within a specific timeframe as inevitably inquiries will continue through our practices and thinking). When we want to share our stories of inquiry, we are inevitably starting from a potentially very different place from those who may be reading or listening to us. So, our abilities to tell a compelling, exciting and inviting story to others about the ongoing potential of our inquiries is vital.

Throughout this course, we have shown how the processes of immersing, imagining and innovating brings different images, metaphors and languages into our thinking and practices (Scott and Armstrong, 2019). These vocabularies in themselves create new ways of expressing the issue, new ways of describing it, and new language to help others engage with it in a way that pushes them 'beyond the orthodox imagining' (Dey and Mason, 2018, p. 89).

These different images, metaphors and languages form a new way of storying our inquiry to help others envision the future with us. As Zandee (2013) argues, using these new languages in 'stor[ies] and other forms of poetic language can [be] insightful, create connection, and open our imaginative eye' (p. 76), whereby we can help others think about future practices in a different way. Composing a written expression of the story of our inquiry (which in other situations is often presented as a report) acts as a vehicle to coalesce others around. In doing so, we can invite others to share in the story and and become partners with us in ensuring that actions and decisions work towards the identified future (Watkins, Mohr and Keely, 2011).

Session 2 introduced you to Todorov's narrative arc (1969) as a way of structuring how you think about the stories you were collecting and writing. This next activity revisits that arc as a way of structuring a story about inquiry.

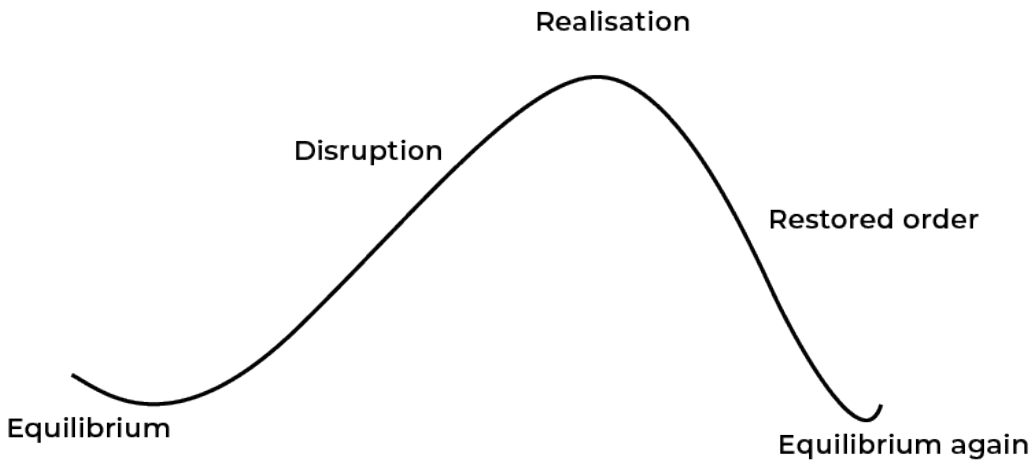


Figure 4 Todorov's narrative arc

As a reminder, there are five stages of the narrative:

- **Equilibrium** exists at the start of the story.
- **Disruption** occurs when an action or a character disrupts the equilibrium.
- **Realisation** occurs when the characters acknowledge the problem and undertake a quest to solve it. The narrative builds to a climax.
- **Restored order** develops as the damage is gradually repaired.
- **Equilibrium again** occurs when the problem is fully solved and some form of (new) reality is possible.

Activity 6 Emerging stories of the future

Allow about 30 minutes

Spend time individually or collectively thinking about the story of your inquiry using this arc as a basis. You may find that there are multiple points you want to make under the heading 'disruption', or multiple ways in which 'restored order' happened. You may also begin to question whether the final title, 'equilibrium again', is suitable for your story, or whether you feel that, as a result of restoring order, you have set in motion a new disequilibrium.

Begin to write your story, considering:

- Where do you need to start from to bring others with you who may not have been as involved in the processes of inquiry?
- Who or what are the main characters and what role do they play in your story?
- What metaphors, images or questions you can use in your story to help the reader/listener begin to 'see' practices or issues differently?
- What form could your story take? What evidence might you use (e.g. stories, quotes, pictures, videos, personal reflections) to create a persuasive case for thinking and doing differently?
- What messages do you want the reader/listener to carry with them from the story into their own practices?

Note: You may feel that a report is not the best format. You might consider a video, a podcast, a blog, a cartoon strip or a poem. But, we don't always have the luxury of deciding our format. If you have a reporting form that you are asked to complete, you may need to either adapt this storying to fit within the prescribed template or find an innovative way to attach it or make small changes to the form to allow you to tell the story as you want. This isn't always easy. Sometimes we have to work within other people's boundaries, but, having an engaging, inviting story before completing a template can still create a better account of what has occurred than starting from the boxes on a form.

Discussion

As with any writing, and particularly story writing which can be complex and have many layers of characters and different sequences of actions, we as authors can sometimes get too close to the text. It is useful to have someone else read your story, seeing if it makes sense without knowing the details of the project or sequences of action. As well as sense-checking, it may be helpful to ask them what

> aspects they found interesting and engaging, what they wanted to know more about, and whether anything strikes them as missing from the story.

Having considered how to share our inquiries with others, the next section returns to considering your own inquiring stance.

4 What do you mean by inquiry?

Session 1 explored some underpinning images and language that shape how we consider inquiry. Throughout this course, you have been asked to critique your own assumptions about inquiry and how others in education may perceive it. Having completed the course, you may find the way you talk, write and do inquiry has changed as a result.

Activity 7 What do you mean by inquiry?

Allow about 15 minutes

Return to your notes from Session 1, Activity 1 in which you created a concept map of the terms inquiry and research.

Using a highlighter or similar, mark those words or phrases that you feel fit with an appreciative approach to inquiry. Take a different colour and mark those which don't. Take a third colour or pen and write in additional words that you didn't originally add to the concept map.

Discussion

Looking at your concept map may indicate a shift, a deepening or expansion of your ideas about inquiring. You may feel on reflection that an appreciative approach aligns strongly with how you are as a person, your view of the world and with inquiry, and therefore this course may be an affirmation of your views and an opportunity to think about how to bring others with you. Alternatively, it may have been a very challenging shift to your previous views about inquiry. Whatever the situation, it is a useful reminder that inquiring through an appreciative approach is a constant, iterative process, without a defined beginning or end, where if you do the same activity again in a year's time, there will most likely be further changes and additions to make.

As well as thinking about how your own definitions of inquiry may have shifted, you are likely to face situations where others hold differing views on what inquiry entails. In the next activity you will think about how you might respond, as a mentor, to those undertaking inquiries themselves.

Activity 8 Mentoring other inquirers

Allow about 20 minutes

Think about the following scenarios and how you would respond to each. Try to think about key messages you would want to get across in each case, and what support, evidence or resources you might draw on to help you do so.

a. You are talking with a colleague who is feeling very negative about an issue she is facing in her practice.
b. You are asked by another group of staff in a nearby school to come and talk about your inquiry project and give an overview of an appreciative approach to inquiry.

c. You are talking to another member of staff who is undertaking an inquiry project. They have been advised by their line manager that, by looking at something that is working well, they are ignoring the real problems that should be the focus of their work.
d. You are leading a meeting in which you ask colleagues to spend time free writing around an issue and then use this as the basis for discussions. A colleague challenges you as to why you are asking them to do a creative writing activity – why can't you just all talk about it. How would you respond?

Discussion

a. In this scenario, you may decide that you could use Activities 5 and 6 from Session 2 to help your colleague 'positively reframe' the opportunities that arise from her difficulties. You may decide that asking her to free write a story of what is happening may help her notice the small things, or take a more appreciative gaze, using a hopeful conversation to bring these aspects to the fore rather than dwelling only on the negative emotions she is feeling.
b. This may be a moment where you are in effect 'reporting' on your project and need to have developed a good story about what has been happening, just as you have started in Activity 6 in this session. You may also think that the interactive model in Session 1, Activity 4 may be a useful starting point for sharing what an appreciative approach to inquiry involves.
c. Throughout this course, we have highlighted the potential tension between adopting an appreciative stance to inquiry, and the views of others about what inquiry involves. In this scenario, you may want to discuss with your colleague about what issue their line manager wants them to explore. It sounds like the manager has a strong opinion about what is happening, and that perspective is important to bring into the project. You may decide to ask them to write their story as part of the immersion phase. You could discuss whether reframing the inquiry as generative rather than positive may help bring the line manager round to realising the potential of developing new practices from things that are working well.
d. Much of the response to this scenario will depend on your relationship with the colleague in question. You may have considered how you might explain:
    - the benefit of paying attention to what happens around an issue
    - the importance of understanding how people in the group use language, image and metaphor around an issue
    - how you can collectively use the stories to map a way forward.

5 Summary of Session 5

This session of the free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, has considered the notion of inquiry and scholarship as praxis, where it cannot be contained, boxed up and kept separate from ourselves and our practices, but is instead enmeshed with everything we do, as a stance and a way of living. The implication of this is that evaluating the ongoing messiness of inquiry involves more than reflecting back over a period of time and writing a linear report of what has happened.

This session has instead explored how to map our experiences and reflections as an ongoing process of letting the inquiry unfold in real time, as part of the generative process of thinking 'what next' rather than 'what's happened'. While we all recognise that there will be a need to sometimes pause and report, whether verbally or in writing, about what we have been doing and thinking, we have explored how telling a good story of our inquiries can help bring other people along with us, either in sharing our vision and working towards it, or by beginning to question some of the accepted practices, images and metaphors that are so common in our educational institutions.

This session has concluded by revisiting what is meant by the term inquiry, understanding how taking an appreciative approach may have challenged some of our initial assumptions, but also developed new ways of thinking and responding to real life scenarios.

6 Course conclusion

Throughout this free course, *An appreciative approach to inquiry*, we have asked you to keep a journal (either paper or electronic) of your writing, images, discussions and stories. Your journal at this point may feel messy, unfinished, or full of interesting small nuggets that you haven't had time to fully follow through. In many ways, this is the view of inquiry we have been advocating throughout this course, where adopting an appreciative approach to inquiry, whether as a stance or specifically within a project, actively engages with the complex, messy and forever changing contexts within educational settings.

This course has demonstrated *why* and *how* taking an appreciative approach in such complex circumstances can act as a powerful generator of practices which are built on firm foundations, arising from what is already in place, what is already thought or considered and what is already known. This is therefore an inquiry emerging from questions and possibilities that already exist, that may create opportunity for making significant positive and generative difference.

To do this we have suggested a range of creative writing and thinking activities designed to help you develop your appreciative conversations, gaze, and storytelling. This isn't necessarily an easy shift to make, and we would encourage you to continue to think about when and where you can have appreciative and therefore generative conversations in your context. We hope that through these conversations, you begin to see the real potential of appreciative inquiry.

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