

Using Appreciative Inquiry in the College Classroom

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For non-traditional students who are working adults or are returning to school years later, the transition to college can be intimidating. Several of my students have expressed how hard it is to learn new concepts. Many feel their minds aren't as "sharp" as they were the first time they attended college. Others talk about the stress that comes with having to balance family and work responsibilities with their course requirements. On more than one occasion, I have had to talk a student out of quitting a program because of one or all of these factors.

Yet many of these students bring a wealth of life experience to the learning environment. Be it former or current military service, entrepreneurship, management responsibilities, or parenting, these non-traditional students have a variety of skills that should cause them pride. Teachers can help boost the motivation of students who feel discouraged due to academic and life challenges. Although I've used a variety of methods to motivate my students, one of the most useful strategies is the Appreciative Inquiry interview.

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organizational development that focuses on what works among an organization, its people, and processes. Although Appreciative Inquiry acknowledges that problems may exist within an organization, the primary goal of this approach is to actively engage the members of an organization by identifying, affirming, and appreciating their skills, resources, and positive experiences. Appreciative Inquiry has been

used in a variety of business, educational, and community organization settings. I was curious how the approach might work in a classroom with the kind of students I've just described.

After a bit of research, I discovered the *Appreciative Inquiry Commons*, a repository of case studies, resources (such as positive questions and interview guides), and evidence that Appreciative Inquiry can have a significant impact on organizational success. Drawing on examples of positive questions, I compiled a 14-item interview guide for my students. It included questions like these: "Describe a time when you perceived yourself to be a particularly good student;" "What is your proudest accomplishment;" "What leadership positions have you held;" "Would you describe yourself as a good note-taker...if so, why;" "How do you handle public speaking;" "What do you like about the faculty in your program;" and "What does this interview have to do with [your major]?" Find these positive questions and others at: <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/practice/toolsQuestions.cfm>

For several terms now I've had my students interview one another in groups of two or three. From the expressions on their faces and the energy in the room it is clear that most of them are engaged in the activity. In almost every class, students ask for more time to talk to each other because they are learning something new about classmates and want to know more. When they have finished, we debrief the activity, and I get initial feedback from the class about what they have learned and how it made them feel. Then they submit their interview guides to me, and in preparation for the following class session, I compile a slide deck summarizing in bulleted lists and in word clouds the students' responses about their strengths, positive experiences, and skills.

In that follow-up class session, we debrief further by reviewing the summary of interviews. It allows the students to see what they may have in common. For example, many students' proudest accomplishments are their children or the fact that they have returned to school after a long absence. One student boasted that her daughter and she were in school at the same time. I then ask students to relate the summary of responses to strategies for succeeding in college. Those who indicated that they're comfortable with note-taking and public speaking are asked to share success tips with their classmates. Entrepreneurs talk about successful business strategies that may be helpful for others who desire to start businesses after graduation. The entire class discusses the characteristics of a successful student.

Although I have encountered the occasional reluctant student, I have found that the Appreciative Interview process helps to motivate and engage students while building a sense of community within the class. If some of your students seem disengaged or discouraged, I wholeheartedly recommend giving the Appreciative Inquiry method a try.

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