

## A NOTE ON QUALITY AND (SUB-)CULTURES

### *Mental models, disciplines, learning evaluations and Appreciative Inquiry*

CES-CELT, Dr. Hans van den Berg, DipM - November 2015

#### Introduction

The UT seeks to establish cross-fertilization of 'High Tech' and 'Human Touch'. This often requires cross-disciplinary communication and collaboration of academics from the natural and the social sciences.

As so eloquently described by C.P. Snow in his 1958 Rede Lecture *Two Cultures*<sup>1</sup>, this cross-disciplinarity is **difficult**. We will discuss the difficulties, and suggest **Appreciative Inquiry** as an approach.

Also, in our work on evaluation of educational quality, we have noticed that evaluation is one thing, but actioning quality enhancements is yet another. We are experimenting with '**learning evaluations**' and will discuss this, while also including Appreciative Inquiry.

#### Difficulties in cross-disciplinary communication

Like all other people, an individual academic has a specific mental model. This is the result of past and current experiences, including learnings. Neuroscience shows that a learner learns, based on what's already encoded in the learner's brain. New concepts, facts, ideas are more easily accepted by a learner and added to the brain's coding when they add to, and not conflict with, what's was already encoded. Consider, as an example, 'the world is flat', versus 'the world is a big roundish ball'.

Academics typically have developed in a specific discipline that has its own 'mental super model', or culture. A striking example is the following: one of the courses the author of this note teaches, is Creative Thinking. One of the techniques for idea creation is brainstorming. Participants, mostly in their mid twenties to thirties, tend to use logical thinking and academic debating skills in a brainstorm. That's not what they should do. They need to focus on the flow of creating ideas, not criticizing or discussing ideas. Divergent thinking, involving association, is needed in a brainstorm. This appears to be difficult for participants.

Next to the disciplinary culture, academic departments may have sub cultures, too. Educational researchers from Lund University have identified the importance of these sub cultures.

People from different academic disciplines, as a consequence, may find it **hard to understand** each other. And it's not only academics, it's the management profession, too, where misunderstanding may arise, e.g. between a manager and an academic.

So, how then, can **mutual understanding** be promoted? In this note, we propose **Appreciative Inquiry**.

#### Appreciative Inquiry as an approach to promote mutual understanding

David Cooperrider is considered to be the founder of the theory of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), together with Suresh Srivastva. Cooperrider, a professor at Case Western Reserve University, obtained his PhD on AI in 1985. AI is increasingly used in various fields.

The five principles of AI are<sup>2</sup>:

1. The **constructionist** principle proposes that what we believe to be true determines what we do, and thought and action emerge from relationships. Through the language and discourse of day to day interactions, people co-construct the organizations they inhabit. The purpose of inquiry is to stimulate new ideas, stories and images that generate new possibilities for action.
2. The principle of **simultaneity** proposes that as we inquire into human systems we change them and the seeds of change, the things people think and talk about, what they discover and learn, are

---

<sup>1</sup> Author is grateful to Margarita Jeliazkova for point him to this source

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative\\_inquiry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry)

- implicit in the very first questions asked. Questions are never neutral, they are fateful, and social systems move in the direction of the questions they most persistently and passionately discuss.
3. The **poetic** principle proposes that organizational life is expressed in the stories people tell each other every day, and the story of the organization is constantly being co-authored. The words and topics chosen for inquiry have an impact far beyond just the words themselves. They invoke sentiments, understandings, and worlds of meaning. In all phases of the inquiry effort is put into using words that point to, enliven and inspire the best in people.
  4. The **anticipatory** principle posits that what we do today is guided by our image of the future. Human systems are forever projecting ahead of themselves a horizon of expectation that brings the future powerfully into the present as a mobilizing agent. Appreciative inquiry uses artful creation of positive imagery on a collective basis to refashion anticipatory reality.
  5. The **positive** principle proposes that momentum and sustainable change requires positive affect and social bonding. Sentiments like hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase creativity, openness to new ideas and people, and cognitive flexibility. They also promote the strong connections and relationships between people, particularly between groups in conflict, required for collective inquiry and change.

This note's author has started small scale experimentation with AI since mid 2014. One example was the evaluation of UT's University Committee on Education, UCO. A second experiment was the conference on the interim findings of the evaluation of five of the UT's honours programmes in September 2015. (This honours evaluation also appears in the section on 'learning evaluation').

These experiences show that AI holds promise, but probably needs more effort and time to explain and to use effectively.

### 'Learning evaluation' to boost quality enhancement

The UT invests a great deal of effort in educational evaluations. However, it has been noted that the 'Deming cycle needs more closure'. The 'Deming cycle', proposed by W. Edwards Deming, consists of four steps: *Plan, Do, Check, Act*. When applied to educational evaluation, the first three steps are planning the evaluation, conducting the evaluation, and identifying improvement aspects. The *Act* step is about realizing the improvement aspects. The need for closure, identified above, probably has to do with limitations between the *Check* and the *Act* step.

This is why we're experimenting with using 'learning evaluation'. In a learning evaluation, stakeholders, like students and teachers, participate in setting the goals of an evaluation, and also in identifying improvement aspects. A learning evaluation is conducted in a transparent and participatory way. These are the main principles:

- A learning evaluation will only work if the stakeholder wants to learn;
- Those who want to learn, must be actively involved in the evaluation core question;
- Those who want to learn, must be actively involved in the design and execution of the evaluation;
- The users of the evaluation participate in the design of the conclusions and recommendations for their practice.

After an initial small **2014** pilot in a TOM module evaluation (see the Toolbox on Quality and TOM), the 2015 Honours evaluation was the first large pilot. It was designed and conducted as a learning evaluation. It had an evaluator budget of around 250 hours, for two evaluators. One was a student, and the author of this note was the lead evaluator. The information gathering stage consisted of three online surveys - students/alumni, teachers, management - and some twenty panel and individual interviews.

After completion of the information gathering stage, evaluators drafted an interim report. This report had the findings, and only one key evaluators recommendation: to consider and discuss the findings during a work conference.

The honours dean, being the commissioner of the evaluation, in consultation with the lead evaluator, drafted the work conference's agenda. Six points were selected for discussion during the work conference. Appreciative inquiry was briefly introduced by the lead evaluator.

The honours dean was pleased with the outcomes of the work conference. The subsequent email request for evaluative responses yielded only a few comments, of a diverse nature.

Overall, this appears to have been a good pilot of a 'learning evaluation'. The key benefit is the ownership of the teachers, students and management involved. Other findings include: (i) a learning evaluation requires rather explicit expectations management; the interim report didn't contain evaluators recommendations like in an degree programme external accreditation process. And (ii) it can be difficult to steer a divergent discussion into convergence. Furthermore, (iii) more conference time is needed to deploy appreciative inquiry.