

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY PRACTICUM
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1. Brief description of the organisation, group, or community you worked with.

I am a Provisional Teaching and Supervising Transactional Analyst qualified in the educational field. The introductory Transactional Analysis (TA) 101 workshop of 12 hours is followed up by the Foundation Year Course comprising 10 weekends throughout the year. This work was done with the 2010 Foundation Year Group (FYG) of 11 people in Cape Town, South Africa. I used Appreciative Inquiry (AI) both as a way of contracting with the group for the year of TA learning, and as a framework for the work throughout the year. The group comprised 2 Air Force pilots, 3 coaches, a social worker from a township clinic, 3 psychologists, a retired woman working with senior people to enhance and maintain their cognitive abilities and a personal assistant to a Cathedral clergyperson.

Appreciative Inquiry resonates well with TA. One of the core concepts of TA is stroke theory. A positive stroke is a unit of recognition that affirms people in their doing and being. The theory proposes that people can choose to give and receive positive and negative strokes, and also that what you stroke, develops. Paying attention to where someone succeeds, and giving them a positive stroke, will invite more of the positive behaviour, whereas focussing on what is wrong and giving a negative stroke of disapproval, judgement or criticism will inevitably encourage the negative behaviour to increase. And of course, this is precisely the premise of AI – focusing on what is life giving encourages more of the same.

2. List the names and/or category of stakeholders you included in the Core Group, the cross-section of people that helped you identify the topic and modify the Interview Guide.

As this was a small group which had contracted specifically to be part of a personal learning process, there was, in my thinking, a 'ready-made' positive topic of enquiry around learning, which I drafted and presented to the group. Watkins and Mohr (2001) describe this way of choosing the topic as a viable option: *"In time limited and subject-focussed processes (team building, conflict resolution etc.), the topic is clear."* (pg 62) They go on to describe that the AI facilitator might choose the topic based on her own understanding of the situation, and then simply help create AI questions about that topic. The group decided that this statement of the positive topic elegantly captured what they were about in this group and were excited to work with it as it stood. The participants of the FYG had committed to the year of learning, believing that it had the power to be transformational both in their own lives and in those of their families, communities and work systems. I modified the interview guide to have learning as the focus.

3. What was the positive topic that the Core Group identified for inquiry? What method did you use to help them identify the topic?

The positive topic of inquiry was:

'Creating a vibrant learning group conducive to transformation and growth'

On reflection, in the future I might choose to let this topic emerge in the words of the group. I'm sure it would have captured a similar sentiment, but it would have reinforced one of the core AI principles – that wholeness brings out the best in people.

I chose to perform an Appreciative Inquiry as a means of exploring the professional and psychological levels of the contract for this learning group.

There are 3 levels of contracting that TA recognises as important:

- **Administrative contract**– This is the agreement on the administrative aspects of the process eg: When will we meet? Who shall attend? Time of meeting. Payment. Working agreement. This aspect of contracting is social and **explicit**.
- **Professional contract** – This refers to the aim of the work. It covers the purpose of the work/meeting, what the roles of all the parties are, the competence of all the parties to play their part, whether facilitating or participating. This aspect of contracting is **implied**.
- **Psychological contract** – This deals with the possible underlying issues – attitudes, expectations, hidden agendas. If this aspect is not discussed openly, it can jeopardize the task – the contract should be 'clean.' There must be an agreement around mutual respect and trust. This aspect of contracting is **hidden**.

The administrative contract is usually done well, the professional level might leave some aspects rather vague as assumptions, and the psychological level is often not addressed at all, and yet the outcome of a project will depend most on this level.

During the process of an Appreciative Inquiry, peoples' attention is focused on all levels of the contract, and the psychological level is made explicit in an appreciative framework, rather than a framework of what might 'go wrong'

4. Attach or include the modified Interview Guide they used, i.e., the Generic Interview Guide slightly modified for the positive topic of the inquiry.

Modified Interview Guide:

1) BEST EXPERIENCE: Tell me a story about the best transformational learning experience you have ever had – an experience that changed the way you **see the world** or **who you are as a person**. The experience was a time when you were most alive, most involved and most excited.

Who was there?

What made it so exceptional?

Describe how you saw yourself and the world before and after this transformational experience

What factors supported this process?

What was your part in this process?

2) VALUES: Lets speak for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically the things you value about yourself, about transformation and learning.

2.1 Without being humble, what do you value most about **yourself** – as a person and as a member of a learning group?

2.2 When you are feeling best about learning, what about the **task** itself do you value?

2.3 What do you value most about the group?

2.4 What is the single most important thing that a **learning community** (ie the participants in this group) can contribute to your learning this year?

2.5 What is the single most important thing that **you** can contribute to your learning this year?

3) CORE VALUE: What do you see as the **core value** of this learning group? How will you help the group to develop this core value?

4) THREE WISHES: What three wishes would you make for this year's learning group so that it will both support and challenge you in your transformational learning?

5. What method of interviews did people use to inquire into exceptionally positive moments, face to face paired interviews, or some other way?

People interviewed each other face to face in pairs. The invitation was to interview somebody whom they did not know and who was most different from them. There was an exciting diversity in this group which included people across the diverse African spectrum, both in nationalities (10 South Africans and 1 Zimbabwean), race, gender, age and profession. One person was ill with measles this weekend – she was brought on board by having an interview with one of the participants before the following month's training.

6. Attach or include a list of the Life-Giving Forces (what they MOST wanted to create MORE of) that the group identified in the stories they shared.

The following emerged as **factors** that contributed to peoples' best learning experiences:

- ✓ facing challenges
- ✓ OKness (a TA term that essentially means respect and unconditional acceptance)
- ✓ relevant information
- ✓ expanding
- ✓ challenge status quo and self
- ✓ discomfort is OK
- ✓ participation
- ✓ honesty
- ✓ insight
- ✓ acceptance of others and self
- ✓ uniqueness
- ✓ social change
- ✓ community
- ✓ dynamic
- ✓ relationship
- ✓ bigger picture
- ✓ sharing
- ✓ moving forward
- ✓ permissions
- ✓ appreciation
- ✓ enjoyment and fun
- ✓ generosity
- ✓ risking and being brave to explore

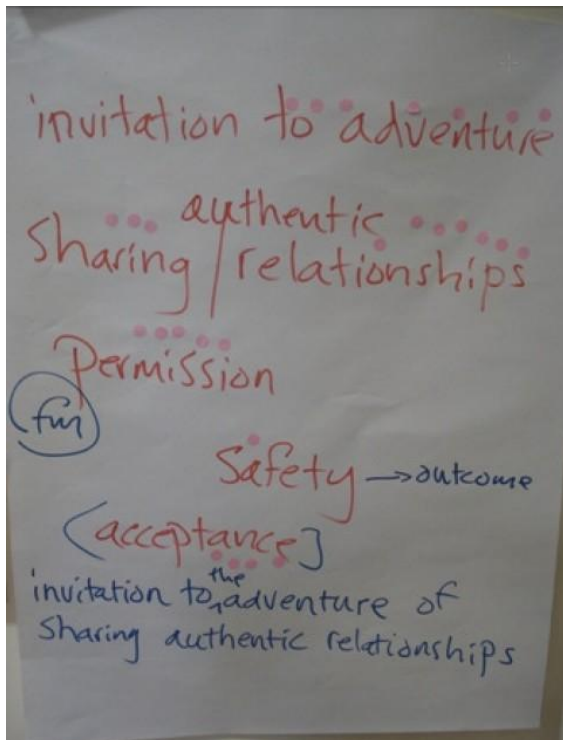
- ✓ lifelong learning
- ✓ own needs validated
- ✓ equality
- ✓ diversity
- ✓ meaning making
- ✓ safe learning environment
- ✓ self tranquillity

From this list, the following **themes** emerged as people grouped the factors:

- ✓ fun / play
- ✓ respect
- ✓ adventure
- ✓ appropriate challenge
- ✓ permission to learn
- ✓ acceptance
- ✓ relationships
- ✓ authenticity
- ✓ invitation / gift
- ✓ sharing

From this, the group identified the following three **life giving forces** and identified the **positive core** by doing a scatter gram –each person had three dots to indicate where most of their energy was.

- ✓ sharing authentic relationships (10 dots)
- ✓ adventure (7 dots)
- ✓ permission to learn (5 dots)



The participants divided into two groups and each group came up with a **creative** portrayal of one of the identified themes:

Group 1 portrayed **adventure** by one of the pilots leading in his 'crew' on the Starship Enterprise and saying their slogan: "Going boldly where no man has gone before!"

Group 2 portrayed **authenticity** by creating paper masks for themselves and then slowly dropping them.

7. Attach or include the Provocative Proposition(s) the group or organization created from the LGFs.

Provocative Proposition

'We are a TA-focussed group engaged in learning, generously sharing authentic relationships and working to enhance personal growth through adventure and fun'

8. Attach or include the organization, group or community's Strategic Intentions and the individual Commitments, Offers, and Requests that were created to realize the Provocative Proposition(s).

The group's **strategic intentions** grew out of the factors they identified as contributing to their best learning experiences. We realised that during the process of the interviews and the making conscious of the conditions when people felt most alive during learning, there was a sense that we were already beginning to create the desired future in the way we interacted with each other. We identified the key factors as respect, trust, authenticity, openness, acceptance and fun. These are all ways of being that would result in ways of acting with each other that would be unique to each person, and these ways of being and acting with each other would enable the provocative proposition to become a reality. The group discussed some basic behaviours that they felt would uphold these key factors:

- respecting of time boundaries
- keeping confidentiality
- listening with curiosity and respect to other viewpoints
- openness to and acceptance of different experiences
- mutual support and encouragement

The group (participants and I) committed ourselves to uphold these intentions as we worked together during the year. I considered myself as part of the group, albeit having a different role as trainer and facilitator. There was an understanding that there would be an honesty and authenticity amongst us that would enable us to address any instances when anyone felt that we were moving away from our strategic intentions. We agreed to review the process half-way through the course and at the end of the course. Both these reviews were to be done in an appreciative way.

When I use this process next time, I will change the focus so that we will discuss what we will notice when things are going well and we are living our strategic intentions. As I reflect on how we fulfilled this contract, I think that much of it came through me modelling an open, inviting and appreciative stance in my interactions with the group. As we checked in with each other every month, the invitation was for reflections on what had worked well during the past month, and what new things they had learned

about themselves and were doing more of. The experiential exercises were framed using positive language and aimed towards an appreciative outcome. I encouraged people to participate actively and share their thinking, and I appreciated everyone's contributions in a discussion. One participant commented on how I never negated what anybody said. She initially came from a belief of things being 'right' or 'wrong' and in time realised that there is learning in all thinking.

My awareness and modelling of these principles encouraged the group to do likewise – it became the norm for how we related to each other in this group. The rarity of such authentic, life giving interactions made the experience of this group a deeply enriching experience that was appreciated greatly, and enabled the depth of learning and change.

9. Impact or Results: What organizational, group or community attitude, process or structure changes have people already made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?
10. What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

As I have documented the progress throughout the year, and waited until the completion of the course to write up this Inquiry, I am answering these questions together.

As the year unfolded and we worked through the different TA concepts, each weekend showed evidence of a growing authenticity and trust in the group. At the end of every weekend there was a time of reflection as people shared and celebrated the shifts in their understanding of themselves and the changes they were going to make. These included a range of things which included the following:

- Resigning from employment and starting a private practise
- Making a significant change in a personal relationship to move towards autonomy instead of remaining in a co-dependency
- Using the learning in the workplace to deal with issues of racism
- Changing a style of working to become more authentic within family and work relationships
- Having a conversation with a family member to restore a tense relationship

I will relate a few stories of success. I ensured that I gave positive strokes to people as they shared their successes.

Connection in diversity

TA believes that when we are growing up, as a way of making meaning of our life, we create a story of our life – our script –which may be positive and life affirming, but may also be limiting. As we bring our script into awareness, we can make decisions at any time to change our script into a lifeplan that is positive, affirming and full of possibilities. The following was the outline I used for this exercise.

Exercise: Share life giving stories

Share with one other person a story about when you felt most alive – a highlight of your life. Who was there? What was happening? What did you believe about yourself? other people? life in general? What were the values you were living out? What meaning did you find in this incident? How did this boost your self - confidence? What were the predominant feelings at this time?

Moving forward: Think how you can harness what you thought, felt and did then as you move into the future.

What is the most important value that you want to live more of?

How do you want people to see you?

What do you want people to be saying about you?

How will you continue to make appropriate decisions?

What is the most important belief about yourself that you hold?

What is the most important belief about others that you will take forward?

What is the most important belief about life that you now embrace?

Two women from diverse backgrounds worked together in this exercise. One was born in a rural area of the Eastern Cape to Xhosa speaking parents, and the other was born in Namibia to German speaking parents. At the end of the process they embraced in tears as they had found that despite their seemingly different cultures and upbringings, they shared many commonalities, most importantly the significance that both sets of parents placed upon the value of education. This exercise took place in the May of 2010 and it was this moment that the women once more related in the December weekend as one of the highlights of their year.

Healing through relational learning

Another success story came from a psychologist who had started studying TA a few years previously. She had learned from a psychologist who herself used TA, only to find that the training hours were not going to be accredited as she had not followed the procedure to become an accredited trainer. She joined this learning group with some resentment at having to 'redo' her learning.

At the last session of the year, when each person had a chance to share what had impacted them the most during the year, she shared how the Appreciative Inquiry process at the beginning of the year had set the scene for a very different learning experience. She wrote cards of appreciation for each person in the group, naming the unique moments each person had spent with her and her process, and being grateful for these transformational steps in her personal journey. Her earlier learning had been in a one to one relationship with the trainer, whereas this learning experience was in relationship with the group. This attests to the power of relational learning held in an appreciative space.

Her card of appreciation to me read as follows:

Every interaction with you has been meaningful. Your core is genuine, reflected in your work and just the way you relate. In many ways this has brought healing to my past learning experiences. Each detail in our notes and in my file flow from that core of giving mindfully and generously to all of us, showing that every member of the group has value,

giving enough presence for security but enough space for individual growth, expression and learning. For this I am grateful because your giving has been invaluable.

Connection across races

In the second weekend, the topic was the TA concept of ego states –the Parent, Adult and Child parts of our personality. In small groups they worked with the following exercise:

Living in a multicultural society, how do we understand and work with diversity and prejudice? What practices do we adopt in a diverse group? Can we use differences to strengthen the whole group? How can we appreciate diversity?

Scenario:

In a company, a black professional man complained of prejudice because his white colleagues did not greet him on his arrival in the office each day. The white professionals insisted that they behaved towards their colleague in the same way as they dealt with each other.

It became apparent that the black man came from a culture in which it was customary for those already in the room to speak first to anyone entering later. The white men, on the other hand, were quite comfortable to start the conversation if they entered a room with people already there.

- 1) *What memories do you think the respective Internal Parents of each of the role players might contain?*
- 2) *What experiences do you think the Internal Child of each of the role players might contain?*
- 3) *What do the respective Internal Adults need to do in order to appreciate the differences in each?*

To deal with prejudice, we need to take into account the absence of Internal Adult reality-testing – people need information but they also need to be helped to think for themselves. It is not easy to do this when you might have been punished for it when you were young. There might be strong feelings of pain and scare in the Internal Child, and powerful messages coming from the Internal Parent.

- 4) *As a counsellor, therapist or coach, how can we work with this?*

This exercise brought up some deep feelings in participants who had been at either end of incidents of prejudice. Some people found the exercise very challenging and there was some discussion as to whether this was an appropriate exercise to do.

The value in this emerged the following month. One of the pilots told of the value of having done this exercise. He related an incident with a black junior officer. There was a disagreement, and in the past he would have probably held onto his unconscious views as a white person and used his rank to discipline the junior officer. Instead he took the

time to connect with this man and find out what was going on in his life. It was a deeply rewarding experience for both of them.

A challenge met with an Appreciative approach

Half way through the year, there was a moment of 'storming' in the group (as is usual in group process) Tuckman (1965). People had formed smaller supportive groups and one person seemed to be more on the edge of the group and had made a comment that offended some people in the group. I chose to spend time with her individually to inquire about her best learning experiences. At the beginning of our conversation she apologised to me for her comment in the group. She began to understand that she was not used to feeling so readily accepted in a group and was most likely out of awareness sabotaging the closeness that was being offered to her in the group, as a way of keeping her beliefs about herself and how she is accepted by others, in place.

At the beginning of the following weekend which was the half way mark in the course, we reviewed the group process in an Appreciative way. In pairs, participants spoke about what their best experience of learning and growth had been in the group, and what enabled this to happen. The conditions that enabled this to happen were shared in the group:

- ✓ Diversity
- ✓ Celebrating successes
- ✓ Respectful listening
- ✓ Openness to be vulnerable
- ✓ Acceptance of self and others
- ✓ Different levels of experience and knowledge
- ✓ Safety and trust
- ✓ A sense of the wider TA community through the facilitator and her links
- ✓ A supportive group
- ✓ Hope
- ✓ Making a difference
- ✓ Taking risks
- ✓ Fun, humour and quirkiness
- ✓ Personal readiness for change
- ✓ Flexibility within a structure
- ✓ Generosity of spirit and resources
- ✓ Ownership and belonging
- ✓ Everyone valued
- ✓ Commitment

Participants had the opportunity to say what they wanted more of, and if there was something that they wanted less of, to reframe that in a positive way. Everyone committed to more of what was already present in the group. Additional needs were for the group to organise their own supportive link-up between modules, and for a list of therapists for them to consult for deeper personal work.

The person with whom I had had the individual meeting sent me an email after that process that expressed her initial fear about us reviewing the group process, and her relief that the Appreciative framework supported everyone in their growth, rather than

accusing and blaming. From this time onwards she seemed to become more comfortable to begin to share her inner process with others, rather than keep the learning at a cognitive level, as she had done till then.

Group imago exercise:

TA has a system of describing the processes a group goes through as visual images or 'imagos'. Keeping the sense of creativity and fun, participants divided into 2 groups to create a visual imago of the learning group. This took place at the penultimate weekend of the course. The sense of possibility of change, the power of a supportive group that gives genuine positive strokes is encapsulated in these photos. This was one of the ways we celebrated successes at intervals during the course.



11. What did you wish for in the inquiry? What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation? What was your "personal best" experience related to facilitating the Inquiry?

My wish in the Inquiry was to co-create and maintain the conditions that would be optimal for a transformational learning process. I had been a learner in such a group seven years previously and had experienced how life changing the process had been for me. My working style is to be organised, reliable, well prepared and pay attention to detail. I value excellence and perfection. But I also know that people learn best by experience, reflection, meaning-making and then trying something different - Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984). My particular challenge was to keep a balance between structure and flexibility that would create safety as well as encourage curiosity and discovery. I believe that by having the strong foundation of the Appreciative Inquiry, and continuously reinforcing this paradigm in the language I used, the way I designed the experiential exercises and the affirmation of people (giving of positive strokes), I grew as a facilitator. The AI foundation gave me the freedom to be more creative and free within the structure.

The three psychologists sometimes challenged my thinking, as their framework up to then, had been one of deficit and need and sorting for what goes wrong. They initially used language that focussed on the problem. I function from a paradigm of possibility and sort for what goes right. Their challenging me enabled me to reflect deeply on my stance and to test it –do I really believe it and live it? As I gave examples of this from my own personal experience and professional experience as a coach and trainer, they began to move towards this more and more. They also saw me modelling this in my interactions with the group. In particular, the person whose story I related above (Healing through relational learning) showed quite a shift in her thinking. There is a current TA school of thinking that speaks about the health system, as opposed to the original script system. The health system celebrates what goes well in our growing up and continuing growth, instead of the script system which analyses what went wrong. She expressed a sense of profound relief that she now had a positive framework on which to hang her therapeutic work. Through this time of challenge I have strengthened my appreciative stance and it has prompted me to offer a workshop at the forthcoming international TA conference in 2011 entitled “Can people change?” I will be exploring AI and other quantum physics models to support this.

At the final weekend, each person had a 30 minute slot to share their best learning experiences during the year. People used their time in different ways –one person read a card of appreciation to each person, another got everyone to stand and do an exercise which showed how every person in a system is connected and when one person moves, the whole system has to shift. She used this as a way of thanking everyone for the impact they had had on her systems –personal and professional. There were reflections on what changes people had made, a poem, a song, two PowerPoint presentations- one comparing TA to other models that had been impactful on that person and the second setting out the ways in which TA had impacted the person. Another learner related her personal change in the form of a children’s story and game. It was evident that over the course of the year there had been slow but meaningful and sustainable changes. I believe that the value of the group and the appreciative contract and paradigm that was picked up month by month (and also in between by some people) was what supported these changes.

I included written feedback of the course in the following format:

1. *When you were most stimulated and alive in the group, what was happening?*
2. *How might things be different to enable even more stimulation and learning?*
3. *Any other comments?*

I include some of the comments:

“The one-on-one exercises were for me the most stimulating and productive and are an essential part of the course for me, building trust in the working relationship of the group and discovering more of myself and others”

“I found the module on life script stimulating. Using a personal memory stimulated engagement in the exercises. Also looking at positive script was useful. I enjoyed working with four in a group and also one-on-one interactions”

“Thanks for an amazing year of personal growth and enhancement of my communication skills”

My personal best in facilitating the process

As I reflect on the year, I realize that the Appreciative Inquiry, although it had the ‘formal’ structure on the first weekend of the course, in a sense it continued throughout the year. And it seems apt to describe what happened in the last weekend, as my personal best.

One of the participants had emailed the group with his suggestion for his slot at the end – he invited people to pose questions to him about his personal learning through the year. As people responded to him, he felt that some of them were flippant and had broken the contract of respect and trust. He had risked being vulnerable with the group, which was a meaningful indication of his growth over the year. He was moving from relying solely on his thinking, to acknowledging his feelings as well. He arrived in the group feeling very “not-OK”. My challenge was to hold the process in the group as everyone checked in at the beginning of the weekend. He at first did not want to elaborate on why he was feeling not OK and said he would prefer to leave the group. This brought up other peoples’ script issues – one person shared that all through her life people had left her with the feeling that she had done something wrong, but never told her what that had been. She challenged him to speak openly – this was an important step for her to do things differently and not merely once again confirm her limiting script beliefs. He rose to the challenge and spoke openly about his disappointment at the group’s response and they had an opportunity to respond and apologise and the day proceeded in a meaningful time of celebrating their growth over the year.

My challenge was to hold this process in an appreciative, safe way. There was an initial feeling of disappointment that this amazing year of growth for me as a trainer might end in a ‘less than perfect’ way. This challenged my beliefs around the importance of things going well and being ‘just right’. But as I reflected, I realized that endings can be stressful, and particularly as the group had become such a supportive group. And when people are stressed they sometimes fall back into their old, limiting script patterns. My old pattern would have been to try and fix the issue, paper it over and hope that everyone would like each other again. Instead, I stayed absolutely in the moment, allowed people to say what they needed to say, summarized and reframed what they were saying from time to time, stayed open and undefended and held a strong positive Pygmalion that even this time of tension and deep emotion was a profound continuation of the learning and growth. Holding the process in this way enabled a deep, authentic sharing to occur and in fact the group could reflect with some awe on what they had together co-created – something meaningful that could survive this final challenge.

Feedback around this from participants was as follows:

“Your holding of the group was wonderful, evidence of which is the way we managed to deal with the very difficult last weekend. I think that if you had imposed another way of dealing

with the issues instead of letting things emerge as they did, things could have gone horribly wrong”

“The group and its diversity were very special, the authenticity and commitment of all quite something unusual. I guess that’s why we were able to hold the events of the last module in the way we did and resolve them without the group falling apart. It was quite something to behold”

12. Have you received permission from the "client" or "clients" to tell us their story? In other words, does Company of Experts.net have permission to share this story with others? If not, who would COE.net need to contact to receive permission?

Yes the group was delighted that I use the process with them for my AI practicum and have given permission for me to share their stories.



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