



Using Appreciative Inquiry to Re-Imagine our College Strategy

Practicum Submitted By:

Claudine Lowry,
Dean of Organizational Learning

Janet Byrne,
Director of Employee Services

Cathy MacLean,
Vice President of People & Planning

Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Report

1. AIFT Dates November 3-6, 2008
 Springfield MA, USA
 Springfield Technical College
2. Worked with Nova Scotia Community College Staff on Re-Imagining our College Strategy on Portfolio
3. NSCC's core group were the chosen members of the newly created Advisory Committee on Portfolio. They represented senior level leaders from all major divisions across NSCC – from the President's office, Administrative Services, Academic Services, Marketing and Communication, People and Planning, Student Services, International, and Human Resources. These representatives were carefully chosen for their ability to influence cascading change and were invited by the Vice-President, People and Planning to whom I report and with whom we worked very closely to ensure the context for Appreciative Inquiry. The Committee consisted of 11 people and began our meetings in January 2009.
4. The positive topic for consideration was Portfolio – what it means for NSCC and how it does and can influence our mission of education without boundaries – how can we at NSCC, using Portfolio, become as a college even better than we are?

Portfolio was the topic given – the topic to discover was how we can re-imagine portfolio into our future. We used two methods to help identify the topic:

1. Created a huge blank mandala for the wall and asked each participant to use pictures (provided¹) to fill in the mandala . The choice of picture was based on how they saw themselves in relation to portfolio. The mandala is always on the wall as we meet.
 2. We used paired interviews to expand on the topic of Portfolio at our first meeting
5. See attached interview guide².
 6. We used face-to-face pairs and then used the circle to discuss the questions. We then posed a question about Dreaming into the Future. We asked in groups of four that participants respond pictorially to the following (see NSCC Extra Extra³). We then debriefed the themes from the resulting pictures (see attached pictures⁴); this took place over two meetings of four hours each.
 7. See Life Giving Forces attachment⁵.
 8. The proactive preposition from this group was:
Portfolio is our foundation, it shapes who we are as an institution, a culture and as learners we will become Canada's Portfolio Learning College and through this achieve Education Without Boundaries.

From this broad preposition we distilled a meaning for Portfolio Learning – The 5 P's of Portfolio (see attached⁶). Each member of the committee undertook to hold focus groups in their areas to ask participants to talk about elements of Portfolio and what these meant to them. Story telling was encouraged and information from the sessions was provided as feedback to the committee to help refine The 5 P's of Portfolio Learning (see Portfolio and Portfolio Learning attachment⁷).

9. Strategic Intentions: Recognizing the committee needed to cascade The 5 P's even further and wider we organized our annual Festival of Learning around the topic of Portfolio Learning. Our committee members hosted a learning café around The 5 P's. Over 60 NSCC employees attended the café and responded to the questions posed (see Festival of Learning attachment⁸). The information obtained was provided as feedback to the Advisory Committee.
10. As a result of the above we have institutionally redesigned our Portfolio course around The 5 P's of Portfolio. In May we piloted with 30 new employees the new Portfolio Learning course. We have held two two-day development sessions with our former Portfolio Practitioners to introduce them to the new model. We have scheduled regional awareness sessions for all College employees to begin in April. We have scheduled four Portfolio Learning courses to happen on campuses in May. We are creating guidelines for our new Portfolio Learning Practitioners, who we will certify through my division – Organizational Learning. We have created a Sharepoint site for sharing Portfolio Learning resources.

Our timeline (attached⁹) to complete the move from Portfolio to Portfolio Learning is September 2011. By that time we will have integrated the Student Learning Portfolio. This is our next Appreciative Inquiry piece.

There has been growing excitement among Portfolio Practitioners who have been using the new model; more employees are asking to be part of the Practitioners group. Employees who take the new course are enthusiastic and are sharing their own resources and moving their learning into other areas of their lives. This is working!!

11. The Advisory Committee has become a Steering Committee, overseeing implementation. The project plan is in place and has senior level support as well as grass roots support. The course and the Practitioners are in place. We celebrated the Practitioners in a Kaleidoscope Ceremony and committed to creating resources for them, bringing them together for dialogue twice per year, with good food and laughter.

The Practitioners have all signed up to work on various pieces of the new Portfolio Learning venture from research to facilitation to technology. They are eager to expand even further than the original group imagined. We have a Manager of Portfolio Learning to help us and a dedicated budget.

12. I knew when I proposed this inquiry around our Portfolio approach that we needed as a College to move beyond seeing Portfolio as a binder to seeing Portfolio as part of our culture. My hope was we could re-imagine portfolio – we have creatively done this through Appreciative Inquiry. I took a chance using Appreciative Inquiry with the core group and there were times when I almost waived, but I trusted the process and it worked.

There were many highlights for me – The 5 P's are now part of our culture and the day our President became enthusiastic about them I knew we were re-imagining.

Also a highlight was the welcoming response from the Portfolio Practitioners to the new Portfolio Learning and their commitment to being part of this. Their dialogue and discourse around learning and their collaborative approach to positive change is so refreshing. We have great employees at NSCC – we need to keep trusting and celebrating them.

I relearned or reconfirmed that my strengths of ideation and maximizer do make a difference and that a small group can begin to change “the world”. I want to be part of that group. I also learned that my two colleagues who accompanied me to the Appreciative Inquiry facilitation in Massachusetts were absolutely essential to the success of this endeavor. We were equal partners in creating the Re-imagining of Portfolio. Their commitment and skills were and are critical.

About my facilitation, I reconfirmed by belief in working from what people know, knowing their stories and engaging in authentic conversation.

Reflection from Janet Byrne:

“My wish for this inquiry was that we would help to redefine an engaging vision and build momentum for the next iteration of Portfolio Learning. I was personally looking forward to the opportunity to work with Claudine and Cathy to ‘test’ my appreciative inquiry learning and new skills against an important legacy building initiative of the College. As Canada’s Portfolio College, portfolio learning needs to be inherent in everything we do. This inquiry was a real opportunity to unleash creativity and innovation in thinking about the future of our college, defining a path forward, and building a common understanding of, and connection to, portfolio learning.

In working through the project, I learned a lot about patience, and taking the time to nurture thinking and ideas in order to truly achieve innovation. I learned a lot about facilitation from Claudine and Cathy, and felt I was also able to bring my strengths and talents to bear in helping move the work along.

My personal ‘best’ moments were in planning the meetings and the consultations. These were times when we, as a team of three colleagues, brainstormed, reflected on our learning at the AIFT, and applied the learning in the process of the inquiry. There were no boundaries, no stupid ideas, and we built on each other’s creativity and strengths. We also had a lot of fun!”

Reflection from Cathy MacLean:

“I have been involved with the concept of Portfolio since 1998 having played a role in the introduction of portfolio development to the College. Over the years, I have struggled with how to inspire others to look at “portfolio” as something more than a “product”. When I first learned of the concept of appreciative inquiry, my mind immediately started to imagine ways in which we could use this approach to look at portfolio in a totally new way. My wish for this inquiry was to help people look at portfolio in a new and innovative way.

There were many lessons learned from this inquiry. I learned that I must put my trust in the process and that the process will work. There were points in the inquiry when I thought we weren’t getting anywhere and that all seemed to be chaotic. Through perseverance, the support of my two colleagues, Janet and Claudine, and trust that the process will work, it all came together and was an amazing experience. We were able to tap into the imagination and expertise of individuals who brought a fresh approach to the concept of portfolio. I am now a firm believer in the appreciative inquiry process and have recently used it in my personal life when making a career/life decision.

I also learned from the inquiry the power and strength of silence. I don’t have to fill the empty space with my voice in order to facilitate effectively. There are times when an individual’s silent thoughts become the tool...not my voice or my words.

My “personal best” experience related to facilitating the inquiry came from working with my two colleagues, Janet and Claudine. The opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue about teaching and learning with two passionate, committed individuals such as Janet and Claudine was the highlight of my week. They challenged my thinking, reminded me of why I became involved in education over 20 years ago, and ignited the spark of creativity in me. We also had many, many laughs and lots of fun! I will always be grateful to them for what they taught me about AI and for their support through this process. We were all learners and together we were able to support each other, teach each other and challenge each other as we applied Appreciative Inquiry to the process of creating a “preferred future” for NSCC.”

13. All material can be used.

PAIRED INTERVIEW

Share a story about the best experience you have ever had, when you were part of or witnessed a transformational change as a result of Portfolio Learning.

1. What role did strengths play?

2. What efforts did you make to ensure that the change would be sustained?

3. What impact did it have on the group?

Results of the “Paired Interview”

- We must be more deliberate
- Support
- Accessibility
- Student centered for every student – seamless
- Reflection/exploratory
- Strength – courage to assist someone to grow
- Permission to have difficult conversations
- Power of portfolio in responding to different situations
- Learning how to learn
- Self development
- Growth (know who you are)
- Get learning from others stories
- Control of own destiny – scary for people
- Meet folks where they are
- Not just about artifact – fuller understanding
- Learning is your responsibility
- Are learners prepared? Jump right into learning
- Are we speaking our own language
- Clear expectations
- Cut and heart knowledge

Re-imagining Portfolio Learning at NSCC: Café Conversations – Festival of Learning, August 13, 2009

Logistics: 12 Café tables, with facilitators circulating; Table Question to be posted on the table. (Facilitators: Claudine, Cathy, Bruce, Monica, Janet, Carol, Sheila M., Don)

Content	Process	Notes
<p>Welcome</p> <p>Setting the Context</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> PL Advisory Committee Contextual Question: <p>“In order to achieve ‘education without boundaries,’ and fully realize our mission, how do we build on the strength of, and learning from, our Portfolio Learning journey to date?”</p> 	<p>Welcome and introduce Table Hosts</p> <p>Describe our goals for the session</p> <p>Provide context on work of PL Advisory Committee to date</p> <p>Introduce contextual question to guide us to a preferred future</p> <p>10M</p>	<p>Claudine to lead</p> <p>Contextual ‘dreaming’ question to be on poster on walls.</p>
<p>Learning Café</p> <p>Table 1, 6, 9 (Philosophy)</p> <p>Question: Reflect on a time when you have truly felt part of a learning-centered college. What was it about the experience that really highlighted the belief in the unique ability of every person to learn from all of life’s experiences?</p>	<p>Small group discussion at each table, to answer both A&B questions</p> <p>One person at each table captures notes, themes, and helps guide participation.</p>	<p>Facilitators to circulate and help clarify, keep groups on track, etc.</p>
<p>Table 2, 7, (Process)</p> <p>Question: Describe a time when you have witnessed or experienced meaningful learning, anchored and real in community through storytelling and dialogue. What was it that made the learning process special?</p>	<p>20M</p> <p>Next, tables discussing the same question will join together and discuss the following:</p>	
<p>Table 3, 8, 11 (Practice)</p> <p>Question: Share stories of key learning that emerged through questioning, journaling or other habits of practice?</p>	<p>Share highlights of the stories you heard and identify key themes. Based on your discussion what are the next 2-3 steps for NSCC in terms of Portfolio Learning?</p>	
<p>Table 4, 9, 12 (Product)</p> <p>Question: Share stories of authentic and innovative demonstration of learning. How were accomplishments and learning shared, and why was it impactful?</p>	<p>One person at each table captures notes, themes, and helps guide participation.</p>	
<p>Table 5, 10 (Person)</p> <p>Think of a time when you have experienced or witnessed transformational learning. How was the uniqueness of the individual celebrated and recognized? How was the ‘whole person’ changed or transformed as a result of the learning?</p>	<p>15M</p>	
<p>Debrief</p> <p>Capture highlights of themes (a few from across the room)</p> <p>Back to context</p> <p>Next Steps (input to be shared with PL Advisory Committee and used in helping plan our next steps as an organization, in ‘re-imagining’ PL.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask the group to refer back to the contextual question from the beginning of the session – themes from the table discussions that will help guide our college response? Probe – How must PL evolve over the next 5 years? Share next steps. <p>15M</p>	<p>Claudine</p> <p>Table Facilitators to remit notes from tables.</p>