

Makin' the Macon Miracle:

Report on AI Summit for Bibb County School District

By Annette Vaillancourt, Ph.D.

In fulfillment of AI certification requirements

Please include your name, title, email address, phone number and agency that you work for.

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Please include the AIFT Dates and location that you received your training.

May 9 – 13, 2011 in Las Vegas

Brief description of the organization, group, or community you worked with.

Bibb County School District in rural Georgia was faced with a 44.6% graduation rate and a high drop out and suspension rate. Furthermore, there was a lack of proficiency in Reading/Language Arts and Mathematics among grades 3 – 8 and high school students.

In 2011, after the hire of new school superintendent Dr. Romain Dallemand, the school district agreed to use the process of Appreciative Inquiry to design an educational system that is intended to graduate 100% of its student by the year 2020. Bibb County School District has approximately 22,000 students and 3400 staff members. It is comprised of 25 elementary schools, 7 middle schools and 7 high schools.

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.

The Core Group was composed of 60 members: The Core Group includes at least one person from each category: elementary, middle school and high school administrators, 2 elementary, 2 middle and 2 high school teachers, elementary, middle and high school paraprofessionals, clerical staff from the elementary, middle and high school, custodial staff and food service from elementary, middle and high school, elementary and high school counselor, middle school psychologist, elementary, middle and high school media staff, 6 community members, Superintendent, 5 cabinet members, 2 associate superintendents, human resources, fine arts, psychological services, campus police, maintenance, community affairs, assessment, professional development, risk management, parent training, transportation, CTAE (Career, Technical and Agricultural Education), media, school nutrition, After School program, Special

Education, gifted education, account, Title I, Custodial, early childhood, instructional technology, technology support and 3 parent advocates.

Team members/facilitators working on this project were Kathy Becker, Jim Pulliam, Eileen Rohan; Kimberley Seitz; Annette Vaillancourt; Joan Trottier, Trevor Warner, Cheri Torres, Charles Miller, Melissa Robaina

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

The 65 person core team, using one-on-one interviews and large and small group discussion about the future of the district and community formulated a plan of action dubbed “The Macon Miracle.” The positive core topic identified for inquiry was **education for the 21st century**. The goal was to “design the best possible learning environment, educational system and teaching strategies to ensure that ALL students discover the gifts they bring to our community and develop the capacity to live to their potential.” In addition, they wanted to design a system that meets students’ needs, today, tomorrow and in the future. This included the ability to work in a multi-ethnic, multi-national workplace. The tagline used was “**Creating the Future We Want to Be Known For.**”

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

See attachment of Interview Guides for Days 1 and 2. The team of facilitators reviewed both documents prior to implementation. As I recall the discussion was mostly about clarifying the outline for each day and the logistics of working with such a large group of people all at once.

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

4300 stakeholders were gathered together in the Macon Centreplex on two Mondays, September 19, 2011 and October 10, 2011. This large group was divided up into several smaller groups with trained facilitators. Face-to-face paired interviews were used to gather data. Data was collected both in written and electronic form.

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 group wanted to create more

- Exceptional learning
- High Expectations
- Opportunity/Innovation

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

“To build strength of character in every student and to ensure that each child is college ready. We WILL prepare our students for achievement in the 21st century, multi-ethnic, global society.”

Attach or include the Strategic Intentions the group or organization developed to realize the Provocative Proposition(s) they created.

1. Exceptional and Relevant learning – making learning meaningful and relevant; making learning interactive and engaging; Broadening opportunities and perspective through experience; learning environment enhancements
2. Student Focus – Strengthening student potential; teaching the whole child
3. Teacher Focus – teaching strategies; shifting our own frames – working collaboratively
4. Parents and Community – parent and community involvement; home environment; support for parents and community
5. Structure of the School – courses and subject matter; global thinking; flexibility in learning; flexibility in calendar/hours, research and best practices; school choice; innovative programming
6. Technology – online classes; state-of-the-art technology; learning styles and levels; technology and global education, technology and school culture; student based technology; social networking in classroom instruction; technology training for students and teachers; technology for parents

Impact or Results: What organizational, group or community attitude, process or structure changes have people made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)?

Immediate changes observed by the facilitation team: As part of the facilitation team, I personally observed the excitement and struggle of the stakeholders to think differently about their organization. Once questions were framed for them in a positive direction, they spoke excitedly about the possibilities.

Day One

During Day One, when I was facilitating in a room of approximately 1400 people, the participants were asked to come and report on their findings or share stories. At first, I got no response, but then I knew to just wait a minute. Soon I had two groups volunteer. Then I had groups rushing the stage in excitement to share/perform. They were rapping, singing, dancing and reading poetry. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, not all who wanted to share could. **I was surprised at the enthusiasm for showing off their skits and reading their headlines. That’s when I started to understand that they were starting to invest in the process.**

Earlier in the day volunteers were also invited to share inspiring stories from the Discovery process. People were moved to tears and inspired. I didn’t think a group of 1400+ could be so still and attentive while one shy teacher spoke of helping a 42 y/o autistic woman draw a self-portrait for the first time in her life.

Getting them into groups of 80 was the most challenging logistically because the room wasn't full. They were supposed to share in large groups, then go back to the smaller group. They moved the chairs! But it all worked anyhow! **I just had to let go and let them figure it out.**

But when it came time for them to shout out their five word headlines about Bibb County Schools in 2020, I got off the stage and ran from group to group with a portable microphone. By the end of the day, the excitement in the group was building and about 80% of the groups were able to share. The testimonials, the poems, skits and songs were inspiring.

Overall, despite the cumbersome logistics of trying to manage group exercises in a huge room where often they couldn't hear me...they still managed and *with very few complaints*. In fact, there were absolutely no complaints about the task or the process. Instead the questions were about lunch, more water, how to adjust the sound system so they could all hear better, and what to do with the data forms we were collecting. This left me with **the impression of their earnest interest and investment in the process, as the irritation/complaints were about the comfort of the participants and making sure their voices were heard.**

Because of the overwhelming number of stakeholders and my being accustomed to working one-on-one or in smaller groups, this kind of facilitation was **a lesson in trusting the process**. At one point I started to go into panic mode because I didn't quite understand the directions for the next exercise. Cheryl Torres, an experienced AI facilitator, who was assigned to "float" took over that part of the task, while I went outside to calm myself. It was then that I realized how all the noise and my attempt to stay connected to a room of 1400+ individuals was taxing my reserves. Later a couple people asked if Cheryl and I had worked together before, as we appeared to be a team and very tuned into each other. That's a testament to the power of positive focus to bring people into alignment. I remember Cheryl asking me what I needed in the way of support. Then when I was in trouble, I was able to ask and receive!

By the time I was composed, an announcement came that Dr. Dallemand wanted us to cut short the plans on the agenda, so we could all reconvene in the arena at 3pm. **I was concerned because we had not finished all the tasks on the agenda and wondered if we were going to lose valuable input in the process.** The gist of Dr. Dallemand's message was that the day had "exceeded" his expectations and he was "elated" and grateful for all participants. He wanted to let everyone know that. His message set the stage/tone for the second half of the summit on October 10, 2011. **I saw his excitement and desire to reconvene the larger group as the first positive outcome of the AI Summit.**

Day Two

This day was much easier on me emotionally. Based on my experience during Day One, I asked to facilitate a smaller group during Day Two. I was teamed with Charles Miller. Having been on the stage last time, I asked Charles if he'd let me be out among the participants so that I could feel more connected to what was going on at that level. He agreed.

I remember just wandering around and listening in to the conversations. That was much more satisfying to me as a facilitator. The worst thing that happened is that I got a blister from running around. I made a mental note that I would prefer to facilitate AI in smaller groups or perhaps that my natural proclivity would be to work with a core team instead of the stakeholders....and wear comfortable shoes!

The activities of the morning session flowed more smoothly. We had a few questions to answer, but the groups went right to work. I didn't think they really understood how to write a Strategic Intentions and Provocative Proposals though.

In the afternoon of Day Two, since we weren't facilitating, Charles and I went to the arena to assist there, if we could. Seemed to me that some people there weren't really into it at all. I overheard them talking about other things or saw them just sitting there doing nothing. While assisting in the process, I came across a table of bus drivers who were struggling to answer the questions. I sent a teacher over to help them. Chuck Miller went by to help them. I saw him sit down and spend most of his time talking with them. Later he reported that part of their struggle was their own illiteracy. They couldn't read the questions! He also reported that they didn't think what they had to say mattered. In conversation he was able to help them give their valuable input!

After the closing ceremony, we were unclear what to do next. During the facilitator's debriefing, I listened to their comments about this being "soul changing" for them. I couldn't relate to that because I have worked for 21 years helping people make life changes every day. Maybe, I was just exhausted or maybe I'm just accustomed to seeing miracles happen ☺

I felt let down (energetically) when it was over. It's a kind of shock/grief reaction. I hoped our involvement would continue somehow. I didn't feel like my talents and abilities were really used well in this endeavor. I could have been any warm body up there on the stage reading an outline during Day One. I didn't feel like I was making any important contribution, though everything I did was needed and necessary. It just wasn't using my talents. The most distressing part was not feeling connect to the participants. I had that feeling of being out of my body.

I commented a couple of times that I hadn't worked within a team for 21 years. I liked not having to be solely responsible for anything. I didn't have to do all the work. I had people to ask for assistance and they pitched in. Not everything went the way I thought it should, but it didn't have to. I helped where I could and where I wanted to. **I realized later *that's doing AI...people assigning themselves to tasks based on their interests and talents. This was the "high point" for me, but it only came upon reflection of that feeling of discontent.*** I was much more interested in documenting the experience on Day Two than facilitating, like I was assigned to do. I was much more interested in engaging with the people directly instead of reading instructions to them. That's why I appointed myself "greeter" as people came and went from the room. That's why I asked Charles to read the instructions...so I could use my talents better out in the groups answering questions and "taking the pulse" of the group. That's why I appointed myself unofficial photographer and videographer. That's why I posted things on Facebook afterwards.

I'd found a way to empower myself and use my time and talents in a way that would move the process forward.

AFTERWARDS

During Day Two, I remembered to bring my Flip Video camera to the sessions. I captured some of the Report Out's on video during Day Two and posted them both on Bibb County Schools Facebook page and on YouTube.

I also noted both support and community backlash for this plan in the newspaper the day after the first meeting was over. The criticisms seemed naïve and did not display critical thinking skills, which is exactly what is needed to prepare students for college! They focused on worries about the cost of the Summit and accusations of "change for change's sake." It seemed that people didn't get the point that the redesign was in *their* hands, NOT that of the superintendent.

I assume this is typical for any proposed change. It seemed to me that the press was sensationalizing the detractors AND that the detractors (who weren't present as stakeholders, though community members were welcome) both misunderstood the process of Appreciative Inquiry and the type of vision Dr. Dallemand had. I had to remind myself that people with vision are often criticized from people who lack or don't share the same vision.

What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?

Since the strategic plan just came out in March 2012, I'm including the link to the PDF, rather than fax the whole thing.

<http://bibb.k12.ga.us/images/Macon%20Miracle.pdf>

As of March 2012, they reported the following "significant changes":

- Plans to open a Welcome Center to build relationships with parents and the community
- Reorganization and restructuring to more effectively deliver instruction and services to students
- Launched a new summer reading program that provided books to every child in the District in an effort to combat summer learning loss
- A new Community Conversation Plan has helped the District strengthen existing lines of communication between employees, parents and the community.

The following webpages announce/document the implementation of the Strategic Plan

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/bibbschools>

<http://www.bibb.k12.ga.us/>

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?

What I was able to do during the two days as a facilitator was to record videos and take hundreds of photos of the event. As mentioned, I posted the videos on the Bibb County School Facebook page with the hope that this would inspire others. I also shared some of the photographs.

How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?

I continue to monitor their progress through Facebook and Google Alerts. Where appropriate I make comments of encouragement or challenge.

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 initial wish for the inquiry was that they would come up with some really innovative ideas and knock my socks off. I counsel many teachers who are burned out and discouraged, so I wanted some stories of hope to bring back to them.

As far as what I learned about myself and my facilitation, let me share part of a letter I wrote to a friend summarizing the whole experience.

“About a month ago, I got a message in a fortune cookie that said, ‘Accept the next opportunity that presents itself.’ Two days later I received the email from Kathy Becker asking me if I could come to Macon, GA to help with this AI Summit. It would count towards my practicum/certification. Of course, I said, “Yes!” Plus, I welcomed something that would break up my routine and offer a new challenge.

There were a few emails back and forth and one short Skype call to discuss logistics, since a summit with 4500+ people was unprecedented. Suffice to say, **I had no idea what was going to be required of me, but enough faith in myself and the trainers that I jumped on a plane to go to a place I’ve never been, to do something I’ve never done without knowing anybody** but Kathy and Jim. Fortunately, I’m not an anxious traveler, nor afraid of going anywhere alone. Plus, I’d never been to the Atlanta airport and was curious to see for myself what it was like.

Of course, I was a little weary and hungry when I arrived, but after dining and meeting up with the group facilitators, we set about stapling together 4500+ packets and distributing them through the ballrooms and exhibit halls of the conference center adjacent to our hotel. I was surprised and flattered to learn that I’d been entrusted to facilitate the largest group – 1400+.

Oh, I forgot to tell you. The AI Summit was being simul-cast on the Bibb County School website, so that people who couldn’t attend could watch. There were also videographers running around to capture salient parts for a DVD to be released later. Newspapers and TV station

personnel were there interviewing participants and recording events. State, county and local elected officials were there. Turns out in my room there were many deputy school superintendents as participants. **I'm glad I didn't know to be nervous.**

At the end of the day, the facilitators met to debrief and start planning for October 10th. **I was aware of feeling totally out of touch with myself – not in my body – numb physically and emotionally.** I listened to other facilitators who had smaller rooms talk about how “powerful” it was and all the excitement. I just felt spent. **I learned that I need to honor my introverted nature and find a way to work more closely with individuals or small groups, so that I can gain some energy back, rather than give it all away.**

Also, as a new facilitator, I would have appreciated more time to review the script and more time to discuss the logistics of forming the large groups. Otherwise, from my training in AI, I knew what was supposed to be happening. Personally, I would have introduced the concept of AI in a general way, so as to impress upon the stakeholders that their participation and input is what will make this work and that is it VITAL to the process. I would have let them know about the next steps and the fact that the decisions about changes was coming from the data gathered rather than from Dr. Dallemand. Consensus building vs. Authoritarian leadership.

Since then, I have received a flurry of emails from the other facilitators and 55 pages of data from the participants. They want us back early so we can have a full day of preparation before October 10th. We will be meeting via web teleconference calls next Wednesday evening and have been asked to do some reporting, uploading of photos to Picasa, give feedback on evolving plans for the 10th and asked to assist in thematizing the data.

I've been telling some of my clients who are teachers about the AI process. They all think it's greatly needed in their school districts! I hope that people are starting to recognize that whole system change is what leads to transformation – that focusing on what works, what gives joy/life and what positive outcomes are desired is most effective. That way it's not resisted because it's generated from the collective experience, wisdom and resources within the organization, who then takes ownership.

What I like about the AI process is it is scalable to any size organization and any objective. Who would have guessed that my first hands on experience would have been with one of the largest groups gathered together in one setting! Everybody kept saying this has never been done and it was “historic.” I know other large organizations have used AI, but not in one setting and this configuration.

The highlight for me of Day One was when Dr. Dallemand introduced himself to me personally, then when the groups started rushing the stage to show off their positive images of the future. I'm glad that got captured on video.

The overall highlights of this experience for me were:

- **Learning the process works even when it's messy – “bless the mess”**

- **Learning that when I empowered myself to give in a way that felt energizing for me that I was DOING AI!!**

Have you received permission from the “client” or “clients” to tell us their story?

I assume so.

In other words, does Company of Experts, Inc. have permission to share this story with others? If not, who would Company of Experts, Inc. need to contact to receive permission?

I assume you do since you are presenting their story at the international conference and it’s being written up for a book on Education and AI.

If you could please answer each question as if telling us a story. Attach any materials that you may use such as power points, agendas, etc. It helps for us to “experience” your facilitation. Also, if you take pictures and we may use those, please include them.

I already sent my photos to Melissa.