

Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training Certification Project

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Burlington-Edison School District is a rural one high-school school district serving approximately 3,800 students. Approximately 40% of our students are Hispanic/Latino of any race. 51% of our students qualify for free or reduced priced meals. 18% are identified as bilingual and 4% of our student population is identified as migrant. At the high school, about 87% of our students graduate in four years. Our district employs 215 classroom teachers. About half of those teachers have a Master's Degree or higher.

Define

In anticipation of this individual certification project, I met with a core group of individuals to define the focus area for this particular Appreciative Inquiry. This core group included the following individuals:

Laurel Browning, District Superintendent

Jeff Drayer, Assistant Superintendent

KC Knudson, Director of Teaching and Learning

Meagan Dawson, English Language Learner Coordinator

Todd Setterlund, Jeff Demorest, and Aaron Darragh, Three principals representing different schools in the district

The core group was chosen based on their current role as the administrative leadership and planning team for the entire school district. I had shared with KC that I was going to attend the Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training. He asked me to report back to him when I returned about what I had learned and how I saw AI impacting B-ESD. After my debrief with him, he took the information back to the District Cabinet meeting where they decided that they would like me to lead all of the district administration through an AI as part of the summer retreat. KC was the "champion" of the AI work and really used his influence to help create time for me to lead this work.

On April 30, 2015 I led the core group through a 45 minute Inquiry Mini Experience as shown on page 118 of the text [Appreciative Inquiry Change at the Speed of Imagination](#) second edition by Jane Magruder Watkins, Bernard Mohr, and Ralph Kelly. I have attached the interview guide I used along with my presenters notes for this session (*2015.04.16.AI.Definition*). Many of the stories shared by the core group of individuals focused around exceptional experiences they had as it pertained to student centered learning. Consequently, the core group decided that the important area of focus for this inquiry would be *Student Centered Learning*. During this mini experience, the participant energy level was very high. I heard and saw participants engaged in deep dialogues about the impact that student centered learning had on them as learners and how they saw opportunities to increase student learning.

Discover

After deciding on a focus for the inquiry, I had time to plan and prepare for the upcoming administrative retreat on August 13, 2015 where I would lead the leadership team through a discovery around *Student Centered Learning*. This inquiry was held at an off-site retreat location in Leavenworth Washington. At

the beginning, I had the entire administrative team meet together for an overview of the day's activities. The team consisted of all the administrators and district office people in the Burlington-Edison School District. Following a brief introduction of the problem, the overview of the day's activities, and the process to be followed for the day, the people present then divided into teams of two for the face-to-face paired interviews to inquire into exceptionally positive moments. Due to the high level of trust in this team and a desire to improve student learning, I did not encounter any resistance to this process. Additionally, the pairs were able to spread out into several locations that helped provide a more private setting for the sharing of these powerful stories. I have attached the interview guide for this particular appreciative inquiry into student centered learning.

To get them started, I shared an experience I had when students were active participants in the designing of their own learning. The students had a project they were working on with the city of Burlington to identify local rain gardens, and then to design one for our high school. The energy these students demonstrated for this project was unbelievable. I saw students who were not excited about public speaking taking risks and presenting their findings to the city mayor, the school board, and other interested parties. Their energy was remarkable. Following my brief example, participants began their paired interviews. Following the paired interview, I divided them into groups of 6 where they shared the highlights of their partner's story. This process brought excitement into the room as participants shared their stories and enthusiasm for the work. Some important themes that supported exceptionally positive moments in student centered learning that resulted from this process were: an appreciation of learner engagement; the ability to embrace unpredictability and take risks through shared responsibility; individualized performance-based assessment; student choice; relevance of learning through personal connections and storytelling; building trust and community through personal relationships; and several other important themes. After stories were shared in small groups, with themes captured by the group on chart paper, highlights were shared with the whole group. This was an exceptional moment in the day where every person was able to have his or her story told and honored.

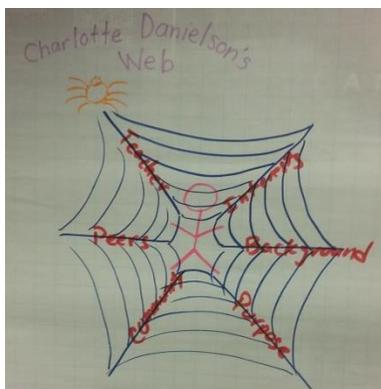
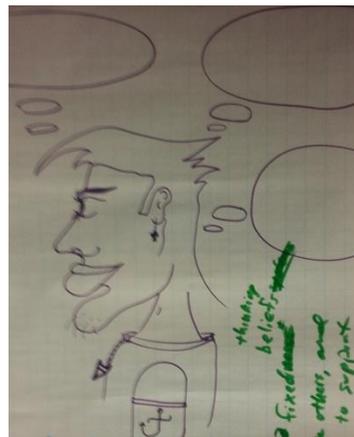
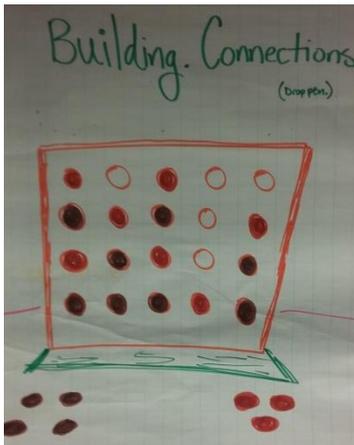
Following the sharing of these stories and life-giving moments, each group identified three overarching themes that were most important to the work they were doing. Again, the energy level in the room was amazing to feel as educators talked about the kinds of things that made them excited to be in education. The themes that were selected by the different groups included building relationships, connecting with students, engaging students in the work, feeling empowered, having a growth mindset, being relevant, learner ownership of the learning process, willingness to participate, and risk taking. Each group wrote the key themes they had identified onto chart paper and then posted it in the room when they shared out to the whole group. I reminded them to focus on what they wanted to create more of as it related to student centered learning. Following the identification and sharing of these themes, I had each individual choose the one theme he or she was most interested in and write it on a note card and hand to me as we headed into our lunch break.

Following the lunch break, I again grouped people, but this time I grouped them according to the theme they had identified before lunch as the one they were the most interested in and that they found the most energizing. This was an excellent way to build off the energy that had been created as part of the

before lunch activities because it again brought like-minded people together who were interested in exploring a similar theme.

Dream

The task for these newly created groups was to create a visual image of their preferred future as it related to student centered learning. This was the most difficult part of the planning for me because I had to plan effectively in order to ensure that the work accomplished was not directed by me as the facilitator, but that it was a result of the conversations and energy experienced during the Discovery phase. It worked exceptionally well to have participants work in groups around a theme with other participants who were interested in creating more of the particular theme. Their task was to create a mental model and translate that into a visual image of their preferred future regarding their chosen topic. The following images illustrate the shared images of the preferred future.



Design

After creating these images of the preferred future, participants were instructed to create a word statement that described their visual image and shared these with the group. Each group was tasked with developing a provocative proposition that met the following qualifications:

- Stretches, challenges or interrupts current practices and habits
- Grows out of stories from within the system that illustrate this ideal as a possibility
- All group members want this as a preferred future
- Stated in bold and affirmative terms
- Moves to action

Again here I had to be very intentional as I planned and developed this stage. It was exceptional that the energy in the room already provided a way to encourage participants to engage. I was a little bit worried that the groups would not design great propositions, but as I circulated and interacted with each group I was able to ask questions such as “How does this motivate you to action?” These kinds of questions helped guide participants in the creation of great word statements which are included below.

- All students experience lifelong success because our community is dedicated to building relationships and connections that are relevant and challenging.
- To realize the district mission to educate each student for lifelong success, B-ESD students are connected to content and people through student centered learning.
- We expose fixed beliefs in ourselves, in others and in our system to support learning for all.

Destiny

For the Destiny phase, all participants were asked to respond to the following statement in a 2 minute free write:

- What can you do in the next couple of weeks to actualize your vision of student centered learning?

Participants were provided a menu of three ways they might think about this question and respond. This menu included the option to create a simple statement of commitment to action; the option to make an offer based on seeing another person’s need; or to articulate a request. After the two minute free write, participants shared out their commitments, offering or request.

Now, six months later, our system has embarked in an exploration of deeper learning which I believe resulted from the work done at our retreat. At the core of deeper learning lies the three provocative statements made, that of building relationships and connections; connecting people to content that is student driven; and challenging the fixed beliefs we see in ourselves, others, and the system. We meet as an administrative team bi-monthly. One of the fantastic things that has happened is that as a team we are more able to share and connect, which leads to more powerful conversations and efforts to change the system to improve student learning.

What I wished for from this inquiry was that as a system we would be able to see the good that we are doing and find ways to build on that success. I wanted to help the system use a more strength focused approach rather than a deficit model.

The most important thing that I learned about myself is that I truly believe that a strength based, positive approach to problem solving and system improvement is more effective and effectively shares positive energy that will facilitate system improvement faster and more effectively than a deficit model.

My personal best experience related to this inquiry was the amount of positive energy in the room. Participants were particularly excited and energized while sharing the positive experiences.

I was most surprised during the inquiry by how simple the process was. It required that I follow the plan and allow the process to work, but it went very smoothly and reports from participants was that this was the most effective and productive retreat they had ever participated in during their careers.

The next time I do this, I will need to make sure that I explain more clearly the visual image portion of the task. I felt like participants were a little bit unclear. As I circulated from table to table, I needed to explain the expectation and the task again for each table.

If you would like to share my story with others, you have my permission.

Please do not share my PowerPoint with others, however.