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Using Appreciative Inquiry to Improve Instruction and Collaborative Partnerships



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As a librarian and educator, I, Amber, have found that true collaboration with faculty is a joyful part of my position. Julie Powell, a faculty member at our institution, and I have worked together on several projects including ones related to library instruction sessions; and one of the strengths of this partnership is a willingness to experiment with different strategies and approaches. Last spring, Julie introduced me to a concept which encourages leaders to ask questions, known as Appreciative Inquiry. We have applied this approach to our collaborative process with each other and to our instruction with students using open-ended questions which allows us to better understand the motives of those with whom we are collaborating. Another benefit of Appreciative Inquiry is the emphasis on replicating aspects of instruction or leadership that are going well. Practitioners take time to think about past successes and imagine a future where success is reality; therefore, identifying what needs to happen for success to be constant.

Gen Z students differ from Millennials and Gen X'ers. Of course, there are similarities, but as educators, we cannot assume our current students learn the way other generations have; this is where Appreciative Inquiry and asking questions helps. Asking questions helps prevent us from making assumptions. We can ask questions of our students such as "What aspects worked well in this session?" or "What approaches are the best way for you to learn the material?" In collaborative partnerships with peers, we can also ask each other questions also. In our partnership, Julie and I both have and should have a say in what happens, but for our collaborative projects to work well, we also want to play to our strengths. Questions like, "What do you see as the goal for this project?" or "What portion would you like to work on?" are effective applications of Appreciative Inquiry.

Last spring, I taught instruction sessions for two courses taught by Julie. In the first course, students seemed uninterested while I demonstrated how to use library resources but perked up when I introduced the game we would be playing. This class was motivated by competition and rewards. In the next class, students seemed more engaged with the instruction but not as motivated or interested in playing the game. I assumed that all students would enjoy playing the game and be motivated by competition or at the very least a token reward such as candy; however, this was not the case. I was able to use the feedback from students to modify lessons for future instruction. My experience sparked a discussion with Julie about class dynamics, candid discussions with students, appreciative questioning, and perseverance.

One benefit of collaboration between faculty and library services implementing Appreciative Inquiry is that it offers an opportunity for authentic feedback. Where a student might hesitate to be critical of an activity with the instructor who led the session, they might be willing to share their true experience with the other facilitator. Through Appreciative Inquiry, the non-instructor can probe a little deeper into the student experience by asking questions such as, “If you were to lead an activity like this one, what would you do differently?” or “Describe what a successful class activity on research would look like to you.” Allowing students to share through an intermediary alleviates some of the anxiety they might experience in evaluating a person of influence, while at the same time, offering authenticity to their experience in the session.

It may seem obvious that instruction is not one size fits all or the instructor’s learning style is different from other’s learning style, but sometimes we need more concrete reminders of this fact. What works for one class may be a total flop for another, which is where perseverance comes in, as educators we cannot just give up. We can collaborate and brainstorm with other educators to find new ideas for instruction or ways to improve our current instruction. We can use Appreciative Inquiry strategies to ask students about their learning experiences and their desire for education. Through the Appreciative Inquiry process, the teacher and students become a team working together to find the best options for everyone. It may seem daunting at first, but Appreciative Inquiry focuses on positives. We take our strengths and the strengths of those we work with and use them. Appreciative Inquiry uses positive past experiences to build better future experiences. When we take time to listen to others and work within our God given abilities, we can show Jesus’ love better, stress less, and help others more.

Whether a librarian is instructing students on research or collaborating with faculty members on a project, the use of Appreciative Inquiry enhances the experience by focusing on effective strategies that engage those involved. In an attempt to eliminate making assumptions, a conversation develops which guides participants to humbly embrace the perspectives of others and craft solutions that benefit all parties involved. Appreciative Inquiry allows participants to both be heard and valued. †