Growing Successful Writers- Appreciative Inquiry Practicum

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I conducted my practicum with the Core Composition program in the Department of English at Auburn University and select faculty across the disciplines invested in effectively teaching writing. We had approximately 35 participants over a two-day, "summit" style experience.

Narrative Summary

In early 2023, my colleague Lydia Wilkes (Assistant Professor and Director of Core Composition in Auburn's Department of English) and I received a small, internal grant from the Office of the Provost to conduct an assessment institute of the Core Composition program. Because of the wide variety of assignment types in the two-semester composition sequence, we knew a standardized assessment of student work products would be difficult. Moreover, such assessment institutes often perpetuate a deficit mindset regarding student writing, and Lydia and I both wanted to disrupt the persistent narrative that students cannot write. I had been reading about Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and I suggested we might use it as a means of program assessment. Lydia and our colleague Charlie Lesh (Associate Professor of English) were enthusiastic about the idea. All three of us were—and continue to be—excited about the social constructivist foundation of AI, which also runs strong in research on rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. Like AI, our field embraces the role of language in framing our experiences, so we all understood the notion of positive framing on an intuitive level.

Despite Lydia and Charlie's enthusiasm, I still had some personal trepidation. Academics pride themselves on critical skepticism, and I worried that participants would greet AI with a critical eye. Two choices enabled us to disrupt that skeptical attitude, at least temporarily. First, Lydia, Charlie, and I chose "Growing Successful Writers" as the topic for the inquiry because we anticipated that it would tap into a core positive value in the program, student growth. Second, I worked to describe the processes entailed in the 5Ds, without getting bogged down in AI terminology, lest our language-oriented participants turn to fault-finding in the vocabulary.

These two moves led to an energizing first day. I was thrilled to feel the energy in the room as 35 voices began discussing high points in student writing during appreciative interviewing. They interviewed one another and took notes on their interview guides; I saw smiles and heard laughter across the room. The themes they identified heartened me, too. I especially appreciated their desire to promote the transfer of learning from Core Composition to subsequent courses in the majors, as well as their strong commitment to supporting the learning of underrepresented and underprepared students.

The afternoon of the first day was equally energetic. We invited teams of 4-6 to create images depicting their dream of the future of core composition. One group created a meme, another made a poster, and several drew comics. Regardless of the medium, two things stuck out to me: first, the groups spent

nearly a full hour composing their images, meaning they were fully engaged in dreaming of the future—we even had to call one group back because we were running out of time! Second, a common theme across the images was collaboration: some groups called attention to a desire for more collaborative writing assignments, while others expressed a real hunger for collaboration amongst instructors in the Core Composition program. Indeed, on the morning of the second day, an extended conversation ensued during which participants centered on the term *generosity* as a core value in the program. They wanted to foster more opportunities to share teaching materials and conversations with one another, both formally and informally. I was joyous when this conversation arose organically. The positive framing created this space for participants to express what they wanted more of in the program. All I had to do was give them the chance to see it for themselves. They took these ideas to heart in the Design stage, too. We invited them to plan a manageable change to one or more courses based on their learning; one participant was so enamored with appreciative interviewing that she decided to integrate it into her literacy narrative assignment!

A second theme arose amongst the provocative propositions each group wrote at the end of the first day: almost uniformly, the groups envisioned the Core Composition program as a vital resource for empowering students' voices, supporting democracy, spurring social change, and even teaching writing as a liberatory practice. When I encountered these provocative propositions, I realized I needn't have worried about participants' critical skepticism. Clearly, most of them took the work seriously, and the AI process allowed them to dream big. I, too, was inspired by their big ideas. If words do indeed create worlds, then the Core Composition program is becoming a program in which freedom is on instructors' lips.

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