

Feasibility Study on Applying Appreciative Inquiry to the Reformation of Teaching in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract: The teaching reformation and innovation in higher education has been a topical issue which is being widely discussed in the current education field. According to the recent key-points of the Ministry of Education, universities and colleges should explore new development modes which not only reflect the features of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a new era but also serve to national and regional economic and social development in a better way. To achieve that, faculty in universities and colleges should proactively apply new teaching methods to the teaching process. Aiming to respond to the central government's lead, this paper analyzes the feasibility of utilizing Appreciative Inquiry in the process of teaching reformation. In the meanwhile, it illustrates the basic concepts and doable approaches which could accelerate transition and stimulate qualitative changes.

1. Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a classic technique in the field of management. It has multiple characteristics which distinguish it from ordinary management methods. Appreciative Inquiry was came up with by David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, two famous organizational behavior experts in America. Their work is especially unique because of the ability to enable positive change, innovation, and sustainable design in systems of large and complex scale. To be more concrete, Appreciative Inquiry contains four key stages which are also called the "4-D model"[1]. According to David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, the "4-D model" includes Discovery-mobilizing a whole system inquiry into the positive change core; Dream-creating a clear results-oriented vision in relation to discovered potential and in relation to questions of higher purpose; Design-creating possibility propositions of the ideal organization; Destiny-strengthening the affirmative capability of the whole system enabling it to build hope and momentum around a deep purpose and creating processes of learning, adjustment, and improvisation[1]. Different from other methods, Appreciative Inquiry is based on the positive side of any organization. It recognizes and admits the former efforts as well as the current potential[2]. As a result, people in the organization could co-create a better place to work through joint efforts and open attitudes.

2. The Current Research Status of Appreciative Inquiry in Teaching

Currently, compared to foreign countries in which Appreciative Inquiry has been widely used in higher education research, the utilization and application of Appreciative Inquiry in the domestic education field is still inadequate. However, an increasing number of educators have attached importance to this method, trying to make full use of it so as to provide speedy actions to respond to the requirements of teaching reformation in higher education. Some researches and experiments have been conducted in the area of medical education. The organizers in this field use this technique to cultivate students' creative thinking abilities and create a more productive environment on campus. In the meanwhile, many university leaders apply this technique to the training process of teachers, such as standardized training for resident physicians on laboratory bases. A teacher in Beijing has utilized this method in standardized training for residents in Chinese PLA General Hospital. The outcome is successful and both trainees and trainers have been benefited a lot through this method [3]. Separating the negative aspects of the organization, Appreciative Inquiry enables the faculty and students to face the necessity of changing in a more acceptable and concrete way. Therefore, despite the fact that this method is relatively new and unique, with the proper guidance and scientific management, the faculty and students could be stimulated with psychological power through conversations which reflect a relaxed atmosphere and a positive theme, and are capable of dealing with existing problems in education and training process.

Compared with the faculty group in higher education, university students show more potential and enthusiasm towards this featured technique. In the current research, Appreciative Inquiry has been used in creating self-managed student associations and improving the cultural education function of vocational associations. Take the second research as an example, a college in Jiangsu Province introduced Appreciative Inquiry theory into the construction of vocational student associations. In that college, there are 126 student associations. Through the investigations conducted, the majority of the students think the cultural education function of these associations is not obvious [4]. To improve this situation, teachers used Appreciative Inquiry, especially its "4-D model", to create a better vision, integrate current advantages and finally find out the best way to spirally improve the cultural education function of vocational associations [4]. Another example has also proved the feasibility and practicability of this technique in undergraduate education. In undergraduate education, Appreciative Inquiry has more advantages than Problem-Based Learning methods(PBL)[7]. One of the reasons behind this is that AI focuses more on the positive aspects, while PBL pays attention to the negative aspects and encourage students to "fix" these negative aspects[7]. Based on the research conducted by the faculty in a university in Anhui Province, as a teaching strategy, AI can enhance the professional self-efficacy and professional identity of nursing undergraduate students[7].

To summarize the above-mentioned key points and draw a conclusion in the current research status, Appreciative Inquiry has been proved to be a productive and effective method which could be used in undergraduate and vocational education to some extent. More researches should be conducted in this area to facilitate the teaching reformation in the new era.

3. The Implementation Plan of Appreciative Inquiry in the Reformation of Teaching in Undergraduate Education

Based on the "4-D model" of Appreciative Inquiry, the initial implementation plan could be divided into four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny.

3.1 Discovery

The first and foremost phase is Discovery, in which the foundation of this reformation plan would be established. According to David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, the core of this phase is to guide the participants to review and share their previous experience, especially the positive experience [1]. Only in this way could the participants find out the existing advantages. Accordingly, they will have a clearer idea of what they are doing and therefore be prepared for the next stage.

To apply these concepts to the teaching reformation in undergraduate education, firstly, teachers should develop a series of questions carefully designed to explore and open up the students' minds. As for the ways to pose these questions, conducting face-to-face meetings or salons to encourage students to share their experiences and ideas could be a proper attempt [5]. Through positive questions such as "What do you think are the highlights of last semester's course?" or "What kind of learning activities in last semester benefited you greatly and you would like to explore more of it in your future study?" Participants' enthusiasm could be ignited and accordingly their attention to this reformation process could be enlarged. The main purpose of this phase is to create a good start and stimulate interest. Relying on these positive questions, participants could be further led to the next stage of the plan.

3.2 Dream

The second phase is Dream, in which all the participants are guided to create a joint vision [1]. To achieve that, brain-storming would be an appropriate and effective way. The purpose of this stage is to shift from the current status to a more valuable and beautiful future. It helps to enhance people's horizons, stimulate imagination, and explore the landscapes which are exhibited through integrating various advantages and energies [5].

To apply the fundamental concepts to a concrete implementation plan, teachers in this phase should focus more on the creation of a joint vision. On the one hand, sufficient brainstorming should be conducted. In a private place where students could feel safe and comfortable, enough guidance should be given to the participants, and some basic training especially for the ones who barely know anything about brainstorming should be arranged before the formal activity. After all, students are the main character in this project. To increase the accuracy and encourage interaction, prerequisite work could not be neglected by the teachers. On the other hand, the brainstorming work should be combined with the investigation results in the previous stage. Students would provide various answers in stage 1. How to categorize these answers and come up with scientific and effective guidance would be the key to success in this phase. A feasible way is to utilize a bullet-point sheet. Teachers could help students to make a list of bullet points. Students describe the teaching approaches they are fond of. Teachers summarize and analyze these key points and select the essence to create a joint vision.

3.3 Design

The third phase in the "4-D model" is Design [1]. Compared with phase 1 and phase 2, phase 3 is more practical and concrete since it requires specific methods instead of a theoretical vision or an initial blueprint. Based on the information obtained, in this phase, we focus more on "building" instead of "thinking". We need to decide the necessary patterns which could integrate all relevant resources within and outside the organization. The ultimate purpose is to concretize the vision we built in the former phase.

The implementation process in this phase is relatively difficult and therefore requires more effort and scientific guidance. Firstly, teachers need to organize the students to think about the necessary

and sufficient conditions for realizing the “dream”. To achieve that, teachers need to build up some effective methods and a series of well-designed procedures. Some off-campus experts could be invited to join this process if necessary. Secondly, teachers should divide the realization stage into different sub-stages [5]. And in each sub-stage, there should be a concrete and doable action plan which targets the main task of this stage. Thirdly, faculties and students should have different assignments according to their abilities and responsibilities. If possible, each student’s group should be assigned a responsible teacher. This item deals with guidance and supervision. Finally, teachers should prepare an “action list” [5]. The list should follow in order and advance step by step in order to avoid increasing the burden on organizational members and hindering the achievement of goals[5].

3.4 Destiny

The last stage of the “4-D model” is Destiny[1], in which the reformation plan would be deployed in the whole organization. That is to say, the organizer not only needs to further strengthen the support from the inside but also has to proactively find a way to consolidate the accomplishments achieved so far and pay attention to their sustainability. According to David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, in this stage, a convergence zone for people to empower one another needs to be built. The convergence zone facilitates the collective re-patterning of human systems regardless of the size of the system[1].

When applying the last stage to the reformation process, teachers in higher education, should firstly summarize the accomplishments achieved so far and create a written report. While submitting the report to the authorities, the teachers should assist the decision maker in the university to analyze the feasibility, trying to come up with the best approach to promote it on a larger scale through joint efforts. The approval and support from the top are crucial for the final success. For one thing, in the current education system, any type of reformation needs to be authorized before concrete methods could be done. For another, teachers in higher education normally couldn’t grasp the comprehensive development situation. Limited by their specific job responsibilities, teachers need the necessary advice from the headmaster. Only by integrating overall awareness and long-term development strategies with the current approach will it be able to increase its adaptability and feasibility in the process of implementation. And after this essential step, another thing the teachers need to do is to focus on the plan’s sustainability. People’s patience and curiosity about new things are limited and have their own regression time. Especially for undergraduate students, due to the characteristics of this curtain group, keeping them motivated is the key to guaranteeing the effects. Some motivation measures should be done when necessary. And for those who continue to support this reformation and contribute more than others, concrete and public rewards should be sufficient and timely.

4. The Points to Consider When Applying Appreciative Inquiry to the Reformation of Teaching in Undergraduate Education

4.1 Pay Attention to the Particularity of Undergraduate students’ Group

To bring a piece of good news to the reformation makers, the current group of undergraduate students generally holds a positive attitude towards innovation and they don’t feel afraid of changes [6]. This certain group of students grew up under high pressure and fierce competition. As a result of that, they don’t avoid changing and they are sort of used to facing various changes. In the meanwhile, the majority of them are fond of innovation. They are familiar with using learning platforms to study [6]. Some of them even become social media influences who have their own

channels and a lot of followers. Therefore, the reformation organizer should have faith in these students. Also, if the approaches taken could be associated with some popular platforms, these students may be easier to be motivated and organized than we think.

In addition to the favorable factors, there is another characteristic of this group which cannot be ignored. The current undergraduate students like to express themselves and want to be distinguished. One direct reason behind this is that they grew up under a circumstance which lacks companionship from parents and peers [6]. Accordingly, they are prone to rebellion and some emotional issues such as helplessness and emptiness are common among them [6]. Therefore, to better resolve this problem and avoid uncertainty factors hindering the reformation plan, teachers should pay attention to psychological changes in students, intervene in the negative changes and provide prompt guidance, physically and psychologically, theoretically and practically. Based on that, if any group member reports some problems to the teachers, teachers should provide and express adequate attention. The students need to be valued. This is one of the premises for them to be supportive.

4.2 Pay Attention to Special Cases and Common Issues

This point is especially important when implementing the reformation process on a larger scale or a different subject. Based on my own teaching experience and interactions with students from different majors, the differences between classes, departments, colleges and universities are significant. Putting identical implementation plans into different subjects is useless and dangerous to some extent. Therefore, the reformation organizers must fully consider the differences between each subject, identify the special cases for this group and distinguish them from common issues. Each time Appreciative Inquiry is about to be used in teaching reformation, the organizer should go through the unique atmosphere and features of the organization, examine the feasibility, renovate some procedures and add extra steps if necessary. To draw a conclusion, the promotion of this technique would not be an easy process. A high level of rigorousness is required.

4.3 Grasp the Essence of Basic Principles

According to David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, there are several principles of Appreciative Inquiry. The first one is The Constructionist Principle. An organization is a vibrant collection of members built on individual cognition and emotions, and the development of the organization is intertwined with individual knowledge and experience[5]. Based on that, to completely implement the reformation, organizers should help students to establish role identity and organizational identification. After all, the organization is built and meaningful because of individuals. The single power of each individual is small in quantity but non-negligible in quality. The second principle is The Principle of Simultaneity. That is to say, the inquiry and changes are not separate moments, but are simultaneous[1]. Even in the first stage of the “4-D” model, the change has begun. The teachers therefore should articulate questions. To be honest, that would be one of the most impactful things a change organizer could do. The third principle is The Poetic Principle which put an emphasis on the dynamic process of organizational development. In this part, David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney used a metaphor which illustrates that human organizations are a lot more like an open book rather than a machine. And the story of the organization is constantly being written by its members[1]. As a result, we should always hold a positive and open attitude. We shall not put any limitation on the direction of organizational development during the process of change. The fourth principle is The Anticipatory Principle. This principle emphasizes the prediction of the possibility of change. According to this principle, organizational change should be in line with the positive expectations, which are conducive to promoting the development of the organization and individuals[5]. The last principle is The Positive Principle. Based on that, teachers

should make efforts to create and maintain a positive vibe. Changes require large amounts of positive things to motivate staff and cultivate success. Therefore, the questions we use should be as positive as possible.

5. Conclusion

Appreciative Inquiry has been proved successful in many cases domestically and overseas. As teaching reformation is increasingly important under the current circumstances in China, each educator in universities should make their own contributions to the exploration of new reformation methods. This paper analyzes the feasibility of applying Appreciative Inquiry to the reformation of teaching in undergraduate education and discusses some fundamental approaches. However, to truly make full use of this technique and even promote it to a larger scale, more researches need to be done in this field to guarantee the expected effects and prevent uncertainties which may jeopardize the enthusiasm of both teachers and students. In the meanwhile, supervision from all levels, on- and off- campus is crucial.

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