

What Works? A Critique of Appreciative Inquiry as a Research Method/ology

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What works? A critique of appreciative inquiry as a research method/ology

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What works? A critique of appreciative inquiry as a research method/ology

Lynn Clouder and Virginia King, Coventry University, UK

ABSTRACT

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has gained prominence as an organizational development approach. For over fifteen years, it has had varied use in higher education research as a methodology and as a collection of methods. Perhaps the most consistently used, yet most criticized, aspect of AI is the positive stance that its adherents adopt. In this chapter, we survey the prevalence and use of AI, both in the wider literature and in higher education research. We offer our own case study to illustrate the practicalities of employing it and discuss our findings. We suggest that educational researchers are overlooking relevant AI research published within other disciplines; that our own and other case stories can provide guidance for the use of AI in academic contexts; and that AI's collaborative and positive standpoint has potential as a research methodology influencing policy.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we undertake the delicate task of critiquing appreciative inquiry, an arguably uncritical approach. By focusing on 'what works' – the positive rather than the negative – we provide a practical discussion of the use of appreciative inquiry as a higher education research method or methodology. However, we also aim to encourage other higher education researchers to consider its use, since it is capable, in the right hands, of inspiring fundamental change in policy and practice. In adopting Tight's (2012, 9) compound term "method/ology", we recognize appreciative inquiry as a philosophical approach to research (methodology) as well as a set of techniques (methods) which may be employed within other methodological frameworks.

We begin by reviewing the origins of appreciative inquiry as an ideology for organizational development, and its use as a process underpinning transformational, emergent and strategic change. Appreciative inquiry is variously abbreviated as 'AE' (appreciative enquiry), 'AI', or 'Ai', the difference being simply one of publishers' style. In this chapter, we will use 'AI'. We survey the use of AI as represented by the presence of the term in higher education research publications; and evaluate a selection of the ways in which AI has been employed, highlighting issues which emerge. Following a synthesis of perspectives on the suitability of AI in qualitative research we use a case study of empirical research, which sought to explore the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education and related insights from staff, to illustrate AI's potential to surface difficult to refute messages to convince policy-makers of the need for change. The chapter concludes with a number of thoughts and suggestions for anyone keen to shift the focus of research conversations away from well-worn and already anticipated issues to explore instead new ways of thinking and working that disrupt the *status quo*.

FUNDAMENTALS OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

While research traditionally focuses on problems, AI was developed to reveal, often overlooked, positive aspects of experience; to generate new theory and to anticipate a new reality. The concept of AI was originally derived from a critique of conventional, problem-driven action research (Lewin, 1946). Cooperrider and Srivastva generated the term in the Department of Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University in the late 1980s, arguing that action research approaches were inadequate for instigating change. They suggested that over-reliance on problem-solving models leads to a limited understanding and analysis of organizational issues and a dearth of innovative and more effective organizational models (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Promoting AI as a "conceptual refiguration of action research" they claimed that it was capable of energizing the creation of strategic change in companies and other organizations (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, 129). Bushe

(2012a) suggests that Cooperrider's doctoral studies under Srivastva's supervision, were influenced by three particular theorists: Gergen, Radar and Morgan. We consider each of these influences briefly.

Gergen's (1978) notion of 'generative theory' concerns theory which does not simply explain the *status quo*, but which challenges assumptions and offers new alternatives. Generative thinking is evident in AI, particularly when presented as an ideology that brings about transformational and emergent change. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987, 129) also drew heavily on Gergen in promoting AI as a post-industrial research approach which could complement action research, claiming that "good theory may be one of the best means human beings have for affecting change". Their key argument was that action research had privileged action over theory-building and that AI could redress the balance. Bushe (2012a) attributes Radar's influence on Cooperrider's developing ideas about AI to his recognition of the potential of combining the scientific goal of interpretation with the artistic goal of appreciation. However, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), while quoting a range of theorists, poets and mystics, make no mention of Radar (1979, cited in Bushe 2012a) and instead debate the need to combine scientific thoroughness with metaphysical openness. They also employ a startling vocabulary to describe organizational life (miracle, mystery, magic, beauty) while arguing for affirmation and an acceptance of ambiguity. This vocabulary results to a large extent from the third significant influence on the original conceptualization of AI, Morgan's (1980) work on metaphor. Arguing that understanding of the world is conceptualized through metaphors which highlight some aspects and hide others, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) contend that action research is underpinned by a metaphor that conceptualizes organizing as problematic, and that what is needed is a conceptualization which highlights the positive. They counter potential critics of AI through Morgan's (1980) argument that the metaphorical underpinnings of accepted theory become so entrenched that thought and inquiry are constrained in ways of which researchers are unaware, leading to hostility to new ways of thinking. Underpinned by new metaphors, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) argue, AI celebrates the human dimension of organizations and, through dialogue, the world "seems to change as we talk" (Cooperrider & Avital, 2004, xiii). Although Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, vii) suggest that AI is "uniquely suited to the values, beliefs, and business challenges facing managers and leaders" because it offers a new way of addressing old problems, AI, like action research, is relevant to many fields, including education (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). However, inquiry that – metaphorically – seeks only to be 'appreciative' may be perceived as restrictive and uncritical in the academic world. Patton (2002) criticizes AI for its emphasis on positive stories suggesting that it is therefore unrealistic and unbalanced. Further, AI's "seductively plausible causal model" (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, 76) of positivity could lead to partial, superficial or otherwise distorted outcomes if applied in a trivial manner or in adverse circumstances.

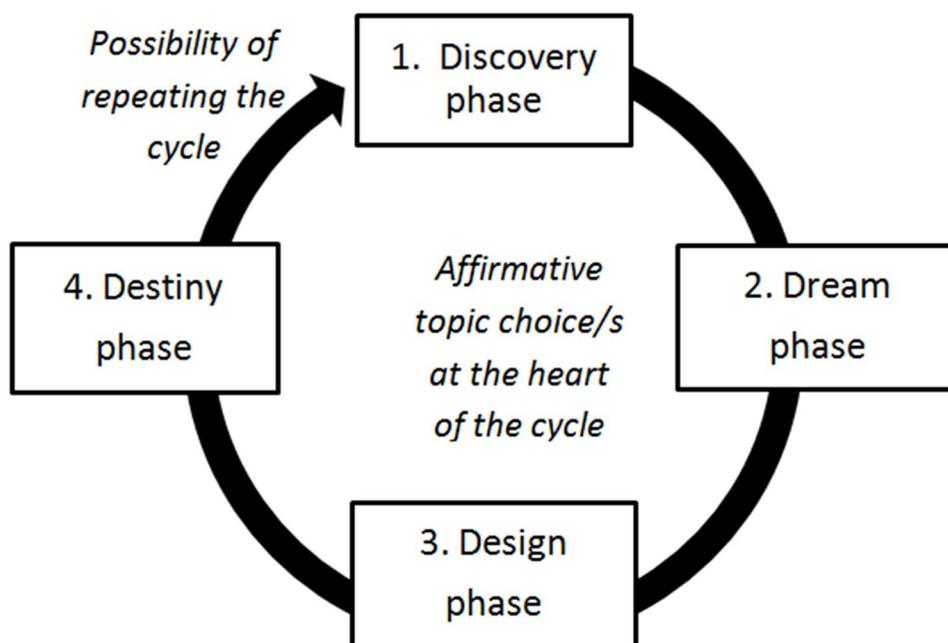
Suggesting that organizations are best viewed as socially constructed realities in which "we create the world we later discover", Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987, 129) saw rehearsing problems as constraining human imagination when new ideas were the force for change and social innovation. Promoting AI as collaborative rather than facilitative as was action research, Cooperrider argued that the biases inherent in a researcher's own positioning actually have positive potential on what is studied (Bushe, 2013). Through collaboration, the inseparably related nature of the research process and its content are acknowledged (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Epistemologically, practically and ethically, collaboration is therefore essential to AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Ideally involving all members of the target organization as co-researchers, because involvement itself can also have a positive effect on participants (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), AI can go some way towards addressing power imbalances. However, Reed (2007), amongst others, argues that AI must not ignore the issue of power within organizations in confusing collaboration with democracy since, without the support of powerful players in an organization, the outcomes of AI risk being sidelined.

Keen to initiate a new and rigorous approach to conducting research, Cooperrider and Srivastva, promoted the philosophy behind the AI and thereby presented it as a methodology rather than as a collection of methods. Like other research approaches, such as ethnography, that might be considered to straddle philosophical and practical domains, the resultant ambiguity has led to a

variety of interpretations of AI. In part, this proliferation of interpretations resulted from Cooperrider's deliberate delay in publishing an AI handbook in order to encourage innovation (Bushe, 2013).

Notwithstanding differences in interpretation and the addition of other principles by practitioners, there has been broad adherence to five basic underpinning AI principles (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001):

- the constructionist principle - reality is socially constructed through language and interaction. The action of inquiry generates understandings of future possibilities;
- the principle of simultaneity - inquiry and change go hand in hand. Change begins at the inception of inquiry and continues via the questions we debate;
- the poetic principle - what we choose to study influences what we discover. The past, present and future are habitually open to interpretation so that our daily discourse constantly recreates the story of our organization like a poem interpretations are endless;
- the anticipatory principle - current behaviour is influenced by images of the future that we collectively imagine;
- the positive principle - momentum for change requires positive thinking



[About here] Figure 1: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D cycle

While there is no single accepted model for AI, the 4-D cycle (*Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny*) as presented by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) provides a good starting point. Figure 1 illustrates the sequence of phases in the cycle, with an arrowhead to indicate the iterative potential of the process, only hinted at by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005). The model is reminiscent of other approaches such as the action research “spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of action” (Lewin, 1946, 38). Despite stressing the unique nature of each appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) also offer a useful outline of activities. At the heart of the process lies the *affirmative topic choice*; the means of focusing effort on an issue. The topic should be positively framed, agreed by a cross-section of organizational representatives and arise out of exploratory interviews concerning best aspects of the organization. This establishes a potential reality which AI participants collaborate to co-construct.

Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers and Jackson (2013) suggest that this initial topic choice may challenge those more used to beginning research with a problem.

Each of the four phases progresses the AI process in researching the chosen affirmative topic/s. Ideally, *Discovery* should involve “everyone” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, 25). Appreciative interviews, perhaps two-hours long, employ only positive questions in order to identify what ‘gives life’ to an organization; that is, what is currently being done best. This has given rise to concerns related to the potential repression of important and meaningful conversations when favouring the study of the ‘best of’ (Bushe, 2012b). Adding to the critique of positivity, Rogers and Fraser (2003, 77) suggest that it also “risks encouraging avoidance of known problems, which is rarely an effective response.”

In the *Dream* phase, the image of the organization’s current best is converted into a strategic vision of future possibilities. It is based on such questions as ‘What is the world calling for (from us)?’ Because future strategy is grounded in current excellence, the *Design* phase is said by Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, 29) to “bridge the best of what is with collective aspiration of what might be”. This phase also encourages participants to think radically in order to frame an ideal. Finally, *Destiny* (originally called *Delivery* [Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, 34]), provides the prospect of implementing and sustaining the new or transformed organization through mutual empowerment and cooperation. In their meta-analysis of the use of the 4D cycle in health care, Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers and Jackson’s (2013) confirm a wide diversity of implementations of the 4D model. However, the fact that “no two Appreciative Inquiry processes are alike” (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005, 25) could be argued to be a strength, since the approach can be adapted to suit the circumstances. In the next section we provide an overview of the use of AI in the wider literature and in higher education research publications.

USES OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

AI in the wider literature.

In order to ascertain the extent of AI usage in the literature, an analysis was undertaken using the Scopus™ platform (www.scopus.com). At the time of the study, the term was found in 2,156 items published between 1996 and 2014. Scopus does not set out to capture complete citation information prior to 1996, hence Google Scholar was used to identify earlier publications, creating a total of 2,215 items. Of these, just over 11% (245) included the words “appreciative inquiry” in the title; 260 (12%) were books or book chapters; 1511 (68%) were articles; and 131 (6%) conference papers. The remainder included reviews, editorials and patents, suggesting that AI has become established as an active research topic.

The term ‘appreciative inquiry’ first appears in the literature over forty years ago (Swanson, 1974) where it is contrasted with ‘unappreciative’ management involvement in computer systems development. This usage seems not to have gained wider adoption. Instead, appreciative inquiry has increasingly come to mean investigation which focuses on positive behaviours and structures as opposed to problematic or negative ones, in the manner established by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987). AI evolved out of the work of these two individuals in a single academic institution to grow in prominence over the years from a handful of publications and citations in the 1980s, to over a hundred per year since 2007. Our combined study confirms the Scopus analysis that the most-published author in AI is David Cooperrider (#24) and like him, the other top five authors either undertook doctoral studies at Case Western Reserve University or are based in the United States. Similarly, the most common affiliation is Case Western Reserve University (#47), while United States-based authors account for 910 of all items (41%). Although 79 countries and fourteen languages are represented, 84% of author affiliations are to English speaking countries, and 98% of all items recorded are written in English.

Since its inception, AI has appealed to a range of disciplines. Scopus associates AI with twenty-five different disciplines (including ‘multidisciplinary’). Our study shows that the initial association of AI

with the fields of management and psychology in the late 1980s soon expanded as the topic was taken up by authors publishing in fields as diverse as computer science, nursing, economics and social sciences (including education).

AI in relation to Higher Education (HE) research

Since no education research related items were found prior to 1996, Scopus alone was used to identify the HE-AI literature. This resulted in 289 items which were published between 1999 and 2014. Consistent with the wider literature, 10% of these (#30) include the phrase “appreciative inquiry” in the title. However, only twelve relevant items (4%) combine the HE-AI terms in their title, abstract or keywords. Of these, five claim to have applied the full AI methodology; four employed methods which they identify as belonging to AI; two adapted AI to draw on its appreciative qualities within an ethnographic observation in one case and an auto-ethnography in the other; and one was inspired by AI amongst other approaches. This suggests that, while HE researchers may choose to employ AI as a methodology they are just as likely to extract its methods or positive ethos.

To explore this further, the most-cited HE-AI items were reviewed to examine their use of AI and their accompanying citation patterns; see Table 1. This confirmed wide variation in the application of AI. Citation patterns suggest there is a danger of relevant research being overlooked by higher education researchers because it appears in disciplinary journals that might seem obscure in the context of a literature search; a not infrequent challenge when an approach is used in diverse contexts.

	Item	Discipline	Times cited	Times cited in HE literature
1 st	Stokols, Misra, Moser, Hall and Taylor (2008)	Medicine	119	5 (4%)
2 nd	Reeves, Lewin, Espin and Zwarenstein (2011)	Health	108	9 (8%)
3 rd	Reason (1999)	Management	84	19 (23%)
4 th	Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006)	Education	73	56 (77%)
5 th	Greenhalgh (2007)	Health	72	0 (0%)
6 th	Gray (2008)	Medicine	58	1 (2%)
7 th	Whitman, Van Rooy and Viswesvaran (2010)	Psychology	48	0 (0%)
8 th	Dutton (2003)	Management	46	2 (4%)
9 th	Carnell (2007)	Education	37	37 (100%)
10 th	Hammick, Olckers & Champion-Smith (2009)	Medicine	36	15 (42%)

[About here] Table 1: Most cited items in the HE-AI literature

According to Scopus, the most cited item (119 times) in the AI-HE literature is Stokols, Misra, Moser, Hall and Taylor (2008), published in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. This article is highly relevant to higher education research since it concerns the creation and development of transdisciplinary research teams. AI is one of many potentially facilitating factors the authors recommend. The paper employs 128 references of which two are from the AI literature and four from educational research, the remainder being from science/medicine/health and from organization/management. The vast majority of articles citing this one are also from science/medicine/health. Three are in research methodology journals and five (4%) are higher education research, including three in health education.

The next most cited item (108 times) is a book, *Interprofessional teamwork for health and social care* (Reeves, Lewin, Espin, & Zwarenstein, 2011). It is largely cited in interprofessional and specialist

investigation of the Welsh Government's approach to assessing the equality impacts of its budget little is mentioned about underpinning values or practical approach (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2012).

CASE STUDY

Background

The following case study illustrates our experience of attempting to use AI as a framework in an effort to influence change in policy with regards to disabled people in higher education, and subsequently in the health and care workforce. Not unlike Cram's (2010, 11) research that she envisaged would produce new knowledge and generative metaphors to "unstuck difficult policy areas" with respect to indigenous populations, we adopted an AI approach based on the aspiration to disrupt the *status quo* and bring about change for people with disabilities.

A number of professional and regulatory bodies oversee pre-registration education for health and social care professional programmes delivered in higher education in the United Kingdom. The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which regulates sixteen of these professions, commissioned a team from Coventry University in 2013 to conduct research to inform the revision of its guidance for people with disabilities wanting to become health or social care professionals.

People with disabilities are under-represented in the health and social care professions due to a complex interplay of a variety of factors. However, research suggests that regulatory frameworks often imply a link between disabilities, competence and safety, creating negative attitudes towards practitioners with disabilities (Chih, 2009). In fact, a review and updated regulations and guidance in line with new legislation were called for almost a decade ago (Sin & Fong, 2007). Given this background, a researcher might anticipate challenges in terms of adopting a research design capable of counteracting skepticism from people with disabilities and/or negative perceptions and associated stereotypical stances from other stakeholders.

Choosing a methodology to fit the research brief

The HCPC commitment to reviewing the quality of information available to prospective students with disabilities about the suitability of health and care professions for them as applicants appeared to reflect a *bona fide* move towards potentially achieving increased participation for disabled applicants. The HCPC acknowledged that the existing guidance was outdated and, to its credit, was keen to base new guidance on insight from people with disabilities. Ironically, previous guidance had not been directly influenced by people with disabilities therefore we interpreted the HCPC commitment to seek their opinions as meaning that the HCPC was amenable to a participatory research approach.

The research brief emphasized a desire to understand how students with disabilities experienced the entire process from admission to higher education, progression, placement learning and transition into employment. The research promised to touch on sensitive issues; for instance, exploring students' preferences for whether they are referred to as 'students with a disability' or 'disabled students'. This distinction may seem to be a matter of semantics yet it is an example of cultural sensitivity of significance; as Sugarman (2002, 7) notes "words create worlds".

Gaining such in depth students' insights necessitated adoption of an emic perspective; "to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events" (Yin, 2010, 11) not appreciated by those outside of the culture as the research team members were, not having a disability. Nevertheless, the importance of maintaining an external world view (etic perspective) in policy research cannot be underestimated given that policies do not exist in isolation and must be put into practice. Olive (2014) highlights how an emic perspective can create tensions for researchers when considering the structures and criteria forming the framework for studying the culture. In this case study the students' insights had to be considered in the context of structural considerations imposed by the regulatory body, higher education institutions and health care providers as well as broader

influences, most notably the Equality Act (2010). It was therefore necessary to gain the perspectives of admissions tutors, lecturers, practice educators and employers as a means of crystallizing findings.

As researchers we were used to working with students with a wide range of disabilities. Given this experience, the problems they faced and those cited by staff supporting these students seemed to us to be more than well-rehearsed. This is, of course, a dangerous assumption highlighting the importance of maintaining an openness to the unexpected no matter what. Nevertheless, we were keen to really try to engage with students with disabilities to understand their perspectives and allow their voices to be heard. However, we needed to find a way of moving beyond problem identification to advocacy.

The rationale for our choice and adoption of AI was that it aligned with our positioning as researchers, keen to demonstrate a commitment to attempt to understand the impact of disability on people's career choices, experiences and trajectories. It also offered a collaborative and participatory approach and an aspiration to change things for the better. AI appeared to offer opportunities to identify good practice or 'what worked' for students (Discovery), to imagine their situation at its best (Dream) and to give them opportunity to voice their suggestions for ways forward (Design). Based on social constructionism, AI has a reputation for fostering an egalitarian dialogue which could lead to the Destiny of cultural change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, 34) and this was our aspiration although we recognized that ultimately the power to change the policy rested outside of our control.

Reflections on the Research process

In the spirit of participation of informed 'inquirers' (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996), four students with disabilities were recruited to work with the team as co-researchers. Their first task was to conduct a critical appraisal of the existing HCPC guidance with the support of the project team, which fed into a series of workshops at a stakeholder day. The students' input proved invaluable given that participants attending the day and the majority of students interviewed subsequently were not aware of the existence of the guidance. The aim of the stakeholder event was to gain as much insight from a diverse range of perspectives as possible and then to fill in any gaps which became evident after the event with individual interviews. The literature talks about AI summits of between 30 and 3,000 people 'participating' simultaneously in a three-to five-day AI 4-D process (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr & Griffin, 2003). To what extent very large numbers can be actively engaged in the AI process is debatable although the suggestion that the process can be extended over a longer period allows one to see how participants at all levels of an organization, such as within a university, could participate to some extent.

Regardless of numbers a summit does sound rather grand; our stakeholder event was probably a hybrid summit more closely resembling what the authors call a 'Core Group Inquiry' or 'AI Learning Team' event. Nevertheless, it included twenty-five delegates, including five students with various disabilities, a carer and a Communications Support Worker. A policy officer from the HCPC also attended the event and was actively involved in the workshops. The day included a number of introductory presentations and then 1 hour slots for discussions using the pyramid technique, which builds conversations initially between two people, then four and subsequently six people (Discovery), analyzing scenarios in small groups (Dream) and whole group discussion (Design). Ideas from the day were then followed up in a series of 107 interviews from participants from universities across the UK. The interviews comprised of 48 individual and focus group student interviews; 24 academic staff, Admissions Tutor and Disability Support staff interviews; 23 Practice Educators interviews; and twelve employer interviews.

In the spirit of AI, the focus was on creating a positive discourse by posing questions around what was possible rather than what was impossible for the students. Vogt, Brown and Issacs (2003) talk about the importance of asking powerful questions as a catalyst for gaining depth of insight and the need to pay attention to the construction, scope, and assumptions of the questions asked. In an effort to promote affirmative competence of participants (Marks-Maran & Fergy, 2007) questions were posed such as, What do you value about yourself? When did you do well? What worked well

for you? Inevitably negative comments still emerged and the aim is to not ignore the problems but to turn them into ideas for improvement, generated with the people who can provide realistic and authentic insights (Oliver, 2005a).

The stakeholder day proved to be exhausting yet inspiring. A key insight for the research team was the importance of sensitivity and ethical awareness in protecting students' interests. Notwithstanding the securing of ethical approval for the project and foreseeing some of the ethical issues that could potentially occur, our concerns about the possibility for over-disclosure as a result of establishing a supportive environment, resonated with those experienced in the context of AI research with Maori families (Cram, 2010). Several students with disabilities offered to have their own experiences turned into authentic case studies which, while providing a powerful means of bringing to life many of the issues covered in the guidance, we reasoned could expose students' stories to future employers. We raised concerns and some students chose to remain anonymous; others were eventually videoed and were happy to be named in the hope that by telling their stories, others would be inspired to apply for university places.

Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers and Jackson's (2013) meta-analysis of experiences of using the 4D cycle in health care identified some perceptions that AI glossed over problems. Similarly, Cram (2010) was concerned about the 'positive spin' and the possibility that participants' from such a marginalized group in society such as indigenous people would deem the approach naïve and too readily dismissive of difficulties. Her experience did not support this concern and in fact, reflects our own, in that the approach did not prevent participants from discussing problems, either face-to-face at the stakeholder event or in subsequent telephone interviews. Like other researchers have found (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009) problems did surface and could dominate conversations and foster a sense of negativity. Many were readily anticipated, others less so. For example, rather than being seen as a benefit, being given additional time in an examination was to some dyslexic students a greater dread. As interviewers we had to be attentive and adept at turning conversations in a more positive direction. This factor highlights the importance of facilitation skills in the AI process. Bushe (2012b) suggests that competencies required of the AI facilitator have been given little attention by researchers and questions whether a positive attitude is necessary to facilitate an AI process. Certainly research in this area seems necessary. Our perception is that unconditional positive regard is crucial (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) and that resilience and a sunny disposition helps!

Nevertheless, positivity can become suspect. We noted that some participants appeared overly positive, glossing over difficulties reported by others. This finding probably chimes with the observation that positives and negatives are not polarized; what is positive for some might be negative for someone else (Oliver, 2005a). However, positivity alerted us to the risk that such perspectives if too prevalent could reinforce the *status quo* of either doing the minimum or nothing at all to support students with disabilities. This risk is exemplified by the fact that, despite evidence to the contrary, some students did not view themselves as having a disability and therefore did not see the potential benefits to be gained from adjustments that could support them through higher education. Juxtaposed with positive messages from admissions tutors, clinicians responsible for supporting students on placement and employers, these students' perspectives were difficult to understand; did they suggest denial, embarrassment, or flaws in the system that discouraged students from disclosing their disability? Others appeared to embrace their disability and very openly discussed their situations and their wish to contribute to a better future for students following a similar path in higher education. The concern voiced by Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers and Jackson (2013) about the potential for raising false hope for participants through the project occurred to us at various points throughout. Destiny was not entirely in our hands. The project report submitted to the funders represented the Design created by participants and a vision of the destiny for a better future for people with disabilities. We await the new guidance to see if the ultimate turn of the cycle is as promising as we all wish for.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In an attempt to synthesize the literature on AI with our practical experience, we identify four themes some of which will sound familiar as they are discussed in relation to many other research approaches. Others are subtly different.

Focus of inquiry and keeping the inquiry focused

Meta-analysis exploring the use of the 4D AI cycle in health care exposes AI as typically used in a rather haphazard and inconsistent way (Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers, & Jackson, 2013) that defies attempts at cross-case comparisons and quality assessment. This is probably not that surprising given the wide range of situations within which it has been used and also applies to its diverse application in policy research and to some extent the previous case study, which typifies its use to fit a very specific brief. Inability to consider cross cases is only problematic where criteria such as those adopted for a systematic review are in operation. However, what seems more important is that the research is described thoroughly and that there is a transparent account of the influential decisions taken which Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers and Jackson (2013) point out is not always the case. Such measures in the context of more positivistic research allow for replication but in the AI sense they are more to do with providing assurance of rigour, trustworthiness and authenticity of findings.

The choice of topic for an AI has been described as 'fateful' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003); the poetic principle means that what we choose to study influences what we discover (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). In agreement with Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins and Hetherington (2009), experience has convinced us that AI is a highly appropriate approach for research focusing on a controversial and/or sensitive area, where emotions may run high and perspectives are contested, such as is the case with issues of disability. As AI relies on drawing on in-depth personal experience of participants, in relation to a specific topic, familiarity is crucial (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009). In this case it is difficult to see how proxy views could provide a valid substitute for the experiences of students with disabilities. Many had ideas about what adjustments had helped them to succeed. However, it is important to note that our case study highlighted the possibility that it may be difficult for participants immersed in a situation to envisage an ideal scenario or even 'the best of' because they simply do not know. A large enough sample and several iterations of the 4D cycle are crucial to getting around this potential issue. We suggest that familiarity also needs to extend to the researchers so that they can anticipate digression into problems areas and be ready to lift the discourse into one of 'imagining something better' (Dream).

The 'best of' and beyond

AI is not a quick fix; our fieldwork lasted for five months and was quite intensive. The literature warns of the need for prolonged and potentially difficult engagement in the field with a wide range of stakeholders to evoke the complexity of the research domain, which again is not unlike other approaches, such as ethnography (Rogers and Fraser, 2003). However, for AI, a corollary is the need for good facilitation skills. Rogers and Fraser (2003) note that AI is a good choice if the necessary facilitation and group work skills and capacities are in place to manage and guide the process. They warn that without affirmatory facilitation and group work skills to apply the 4D cycle appropriately, AI could go dangerously wrong, leading to vacuous, self-congratulatory findings (by avoiding hard issues and uncomplimentary data); or even worse, it "could provide a platform for airing vengeful and destructive sentiments" (Rogers & Fraser, 2003, 81).

In addition, we suggest that the need to steer the AI process, to avoid these pitfalls, calls for facilitators to adopt both a reflective and reflexive approach. Yet, van der Haar and Hosking (2004) note that within the extensive literature on AI both evaluation studies and critical reflections are rare, despite recognition that critical reflection is an important element of the AI process (Bellinger & Elliott, 2011). In fact, Grant and Humphries (2006, 407) suggest that "the application of a critical perspective to the paradigm of appreciative inquiry may appear paradoxical ... [and] almost contradictory". Nevertheless, van der Haar and Hosking (2004) concede that given that AI is underpinned by social constructionism, it is a collaborative activity rather than one of individual sense-making associated with social constructivism, "therefore to rule out critical reflection may be

experienced as negative ...[and] one person seeking to impose his/her reality on others is inconsistent with other aspects of AI” (p. 1032).

It is our contention that AI can, and should, in itself promote critical reflection. Notwithstanding the generic impact of reflection on the research process, research that focuses on working with participants from marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities, highlights the importance of a critical edge. In our experience, positivity does not preclude criticality; nor is criticality necessarily associated with negative outcomes. However, as with other qualitative research approaches, in-depth insight is only achieved by maintaining a high degree of reflexivity throughout the process. Indeed, Oliver (2005b) argues for the need to move beyond studying ‘the best of’ to be more reflexive. We argue that with good researcher facilitation skills both are achievable.

Collaboration and Partnership

Bellinger and Elliott’s (2011, 721) advocacy of AI is explained in their acknowledging that “[I]ike social work, AI is grounded in relationship, context and a determination to collaborate for mutual benefit”. Such synergy between the ideology adopted by researchers, the focus of study and the approach adopted are in our minds crucial to the success of the research. It is also important for its ethical good health. Given its participatory ethos AI provides a means of giving voice to marginalized or disempowered groups in higher education and in society. In this respect it is potentially emancipatory, a suggestion which gets scant mention in the literature. The disabled participants, taking part in our research, contributed because they could see a better future and wanted other students to avoid having to navigate some of the hurdles that they had encountered by contributing to ideas for change. The literature warns of not raising false hopes (Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers, & Jackson, 2013). It warns of the risk that AI may encourage unrealistic and dysfunctional perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour, encouraging unjustified and intemperate optimism (Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003). We argue that these views are paternalistic in that they do not credit participants, as well as researchers, with having their feet on the ground.

AI and policy research

The notions of collaboration and partnership in AI can also extend to the research commissioners. In the context of the case study research, the HCPC were committed to change; they met students and learned first-hand of the guidance that they needed to provide to address the challenges that students encountered. Nevertheless, the process gave rise to tensions in giving voice to the students portraying an insider emic perspective and the etic perspective that needs to be taken in presenting realistic recommendations to a funder. For instance, making a recommendation about how to refer to disabled people created a dilemma given that the Equality Act (2010) does not use the students’ preferred term.

When confronted with an option for addressing a problem that has been proven to work it is difficult to dismiss it out of hand as a viable solution. Nevertheless, the HCPC might choose to ignore the report recommendations; if so, the 4D cycle stops short of following through and achieving change. Evaluation of change appears to be a perennial sticking point and one that clearly needs to be addressed by AI users (Trajkovski, Schmied, Vickers, & Jackson, 2013). The test of faith will come with publication of the new guidance. This potential difference in outlook between researchers and funders is a limitation of using AI in funded and/or policy research.

However, the principle of simultaneity, which suggests that change and inquiry go hand in hand (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001) can be said to operate at many levels. The students directly involved in the project, as well as academic staff and practice-based colleagues all learned more from each other about how disability can be accommodated in the workplace; new ideas of sources of support and insight into feasible adjustments has provided added value regardless of the headline recommendations for new HCPC guidance.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally AI has been used as a means of energizing the creation of strategic change in companies and organizations. We have analyzed its use in educational research where many AI elements have been “borrowed” (Shuayb, Sharp, Judkins, & Hetherington, 2009: 14) to invoke change at policy and practical levels. Our survey showed that HE researchers may be missing useful research in other disciplines. The literature has been used as a backdrop to our case study which has drawn out some of the experiences we had in implementing AI and highlighted several factors that we suggest must be considered before opting to adopt an AI approach.

The first factor is to involve the right people. The real world view of people who fully understand and live the experience is crucial. The right research team is vital to the success of the research; a positive attitude, unconditional positive regard, empathy and reflective capability are all necessary. Together, participants and researchers need a commitment to the principle of co-created change; this includes people of influence, such as managers in HE, policy makers or funders.

Secondly, the AI process requires rigorous attention to detail; it involves keeping a good focus, careful framing of questions and delicate management of data collection methods in order to maintain the focus on ‘what works’. Thirdly, well developed analytical capability is crucial. Adept analysis of all viewpoints and a high degree of reflexivity – even scepticism – on the part of the research team are needed to promote the trustworthiness of findings. Thus, AI is more than a collection of methods, used well, it is a methodology which has potential to realize the dream of influencing policy.

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