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Appreciative Inquiry for a Supportive Climate

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Appreciative Inquiry for a Supportive Climate

Abstract

Most nonprofit organizations rely heavily on volunteers. In a service-learning course that works with nonprofit community partners, it is important to foster a supportive climate. Traditional problem-solving procedures typically involve identifying a problem, brainstorming for possible solutions, evaluating possible solutions, and implementation. With positive framing, a traditional problem-solving approach could be transformed by the method of appreciative inquiry.

Traditional problem-solving approach is weaknesses-based, and appreciative inquiry is strengths-based. This paper demonstrates that appreciative inquiry can be more effective in building a supportive climate when working with nonprofit community partners. Appreciative inquiry starts with discovering the successes of an organization, then documenting the aspirations of the organization, devising plans to realize the aspirations, and implementing the plans.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, service learning, organizational communication, group communication

Appreciative Inquiry for a Supportive Climate

Introduction

Service learning has proven to be an effective pedagogical approach to enhance student learning (Gomez-Estern, Arias-Sánchez, Macarro, Romero & Lozano, 2021; Wang, Zhang & Yao, 2019). Personally, I have incorporated service learning into my group communication courses for the past 15 years. Students worked on a variety of projects for the community partners that were paired with my courses by the Civic and Community Engagement Office (CCE) at my institution. The service-learning projects in the group communication course were structured by using a general Procedural Model of Problem Solving (P-MOPS), which embodies John Dewey's reflective thinking process (Galanes & Adams, 2019). P-MOPS comprises five steps: 1) Problem description and analysis, 2) Generating and elaborating on possible solutions, 3) Evaluating possible solutions, 4) Recommendation, and 5) Implementation. With this structure, students would go into an organization and try to identify the "problems" that the organization has. The P-MOPS approach, although an effective problem-solving procedure, at times created somewhat defensive climates between my classes and the community partners.

When the opportunity arose to teach organizational communication, I decided to teach it as a service-learning course. With the experience of students going into organizations to identify their "problems," resulting in a probable defensive climate. I decided that the method of appreciative inquiry might be a better option to create a more supportive climate.

Goal

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that appreciative inquiry is a better option when working with nonprofit organizations. Most of the problem-solving procedures start with a

problem. Used in the right contexts, problem solving approach could be an effective way to move an organization forward. However, in the context of nonprofit organizations, which rely heavily on volunteers, appreciative inquiry becomes a much better alternative to ensure a more supportive climate.

Rationale

Positive framing is at the heart of appreciative inquiry, which comprises a “4-D” cycle of collaboration (Cooperrider, 2012). The *first* D stands for Discovery. At this strengths-based discovery phase, students collect information about their prospective community partner’s successes and the reasons behind those successes. The *second* D stands for Dream. At this aspirations-based dream stage, students are to document an idealized future version of the organization or the organization’s dreams. The *third* D is the Design phase, in which students will devise a plan to help the organization fulfill its dreams and bring the organization to the future it envisioned. The *fourth* D is Destiny, where students will implement the plan from the design phase and help the organization sustain the change. Because of the strengths-based and assets-based approach of appreciative inquiry, the interaction between students and community partners will be up-lifting, pleasant, and positive. In other words, appreciative inquiry transcends most of the negatively framed and weaknesses-based problem-solving approaches.

Directions

Each semester that I teach a service-learning course, the CCE office at my institution would match my course with four community partners. My service-learning courses have a capacity of 25 students. There is a “meet the community partners day” in the beginning of the semester when the community partners will visit the class to introduce their organization to the

students. Students then choose which organization they want to work with for the remainder of the semester. The class is divided into four groups of five to seven students, and each group will work with one community partner. This appreciative inquiry project, a group project, is worth 25 percent of the final grade. Students are not graded for this assignment until the end of the semester when all phases are completed. However, a group presentation is required for each phase so students can learn from each other and can complete the project in a timely manner. Three individual journal entries are required so I know the dynamic of each group.

To implement appreciative inquiry, I added a Define phase to the original “4-D” cycle. In the define phase, students acquaint themselves with the organization and arm themselves with basic information about the organization.

Explanation

I used the following rubric for the appreciative inquiry project. The due date is the group presentation day. By the end of the semester, students would compile a PowerPoint presentation that comprises all five phases.

Phase 1 – Define (due _____)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the organization’s background information, such as mission, organizational structure, number of staff, and the clientele?
Phase 2 – Discover (due _____)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the positive stories? • What works? • What are the successes? • What are the strengths? • What characteristics contributed to the organization’s successes?

Phase 3 – Dream (due _____)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the organization’s dreams? What is the dream statement? • What is the preferred future? • What are the organization’s hopes and aspirations? • What is the organization’s shared vision?
Phase 4 – Design (due _____)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What could be done to bring the organization to where it wants to be? • What are the results of your brainstorming? • What is your plan? What is your roadmap? • What changes could the organization implement?
Phase 5 – Deliver (due _____)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What procedures were used to implement the design? • What are the results of the implementation?

Results

Part of the requirements for this project is for students to submit three reflective journals, approximately one journal per month. The purposes of the journals are for students to report to me what they did for the project, to reflect on their group experience, to express how they felt about the project along the way, and to apply course content to their experience. There were 46 submissions in total. Among the submissions, 20 percent mentioned appreciative inquiry without any prompts, satisfaction was expressed on 72 percent of the submissions, 7 percent of the submissions showed dissatisfaction, and 22 percent showed neutral sentiment (See Table 1). Among the 7 percent that showed dissatisfaction, students worked with the same community partner and mentioned communication problems with the community partner.

To conclude, appreciative inquiry was an effective pedagogical approach, especially used in the context of service learning. Students were intrigued with this approach, as shown in the nine appreciative inquiry mentions (20 percent) in their journals without any prompts. Students’ overall satisfaction with the service-learning experience was high (72 percent).

Table 1

Student Journals	Frequency	Percentage
Mentioned Appreciative Inquiry	9	20%
Satisfied	33	72%
Not Satisfied	3	7%
Neutral	10	22%
Total	46	100%

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