

## The Appreciative Mindset and its Congruency with Brené Brown's Research

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### Abstract

According to Bloom et al. (2008), there are six components of the Appreciative Mindset (i.e., care about and believe in the potential of each student, practice gratitude, continually hone one's craft, remember your power, be insatiably curious, and be culturally aware and responsive). These six components are congruent with Brown's (2020) research on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. The purpose of this article is to define the Appreciative Mindset and delineate its six components and how each component is congruent with Brown's research.

### Keywords

Appreciative Advising, Appreciative Mindset, student success, sense of belonging

As a master's degree student in the Higher Education Leadership program at Florida Atlantic University, I am enrolled in an Appreciative Education class taught by Jennifer Bloom, Amanda Propst Cuevas, and Bryan Hursh. One of the underlying principles of Appreciative Education that has resonated with me is the Appreciative Mindset, which reminds me to focus on the best in other people instead of the worst. One of the reasons that the Appreciative Mindset resonates so deeply with me is the congruency between it and Brown's (2020) research on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston. I first learned about her work via her Netflix documentary film, *The Call to Courage* (Restrepo, 2019). Her sense of humor and her storytelling were captivating and led me to read her books, listen to her podcasts, and visit her website. Brown's (2020) research found that vulnerability is not a sign of weakness; instead, it is a sign of courage, and without vulnerability, one cannot build genuine relationships with people. She explained that vulnerability is having the courage to show up even when one does not know the outcome or whether one will be criticized. Moreover, if one wants more joy, love, and belonging, one must be vulnerable to show up, to be seen, and more importantly, to have gratitude for people willing to be seen and share together (Restrepo, 2019). Both the Appreciative Mindset and Brown's research are centered on gratitude, the power of storytelling, and self-reflection. The purpose of this article is to define the Appreciative Mindset, delineate its six components, and explore how each component is congruent with Brown's research.

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## What is an Appreciative Mindset?

The Appreciative Mindset undergirds the Appreciative Education (AE) theory-to-practice framework that delivers “high-quality education on both an individual and organizational level” (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 5). Appreciative Education challenges deficit-based thinking and focuses on identifying students’ potential, skills, and past successes. Cooperrider (1986) originally developed Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach to creating change in organizations. This approach to creating positive change in organizations encompassed the Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny phases (Cooperrider, 1986). Bloom et al. (2008) then adapted the four phases of AI to meet the needs of academic advisors, revised the Destiny phase to Deliver, and added the Disarm and Don’t Settle phases, creating the six phases of the Appreciative Advising framework (i.e., Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle; Bloom et al., 2013). In the Disarm phase, academic advisors create a safe and welcoming space to build a positive first impression with students. Then, advisors ask generative, open-ended questions in the Discover phase to explore students’ strengths, skills, and aspirations. In the Dream phase, advisors encourage students to share their dreams about their ideal future. Afterward, advisors co-create a plan of action with students in the Design phase. In the Deliver phase, students carry out the plan that was co-created during the Design phase. Finally, in the Don’t Settle phase, advisors and students alike continuously seek to improve their performance.

Notably, the Appreciative Mindset, which is at the heart of both the Appreciative Education and Appreciative Advising frameworks, includes the following six components: care about and believe in the potential of each student, practice gratitude, continually hone one’s craft, remember your power, be insatiably curious, and be culturally aware and responsive (Bloom et al., 2008). Next, each of these components will be covered individually and I will highlight the congruency of each component with Brown’s research.

### Care About and Believe in the Potential of Each Student

The first component of the Appreciative Mindset involves academic advisors “caring about and believing in the potential of each student” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 27). This approach challenges deficit-based thinking and shifts the paradigm from focusing on problem-solving to exploring students’ strengths, skills, and potential. Instead of looking at students as problems to solve, it reminds advisors to intentionally seek the best and look for the potential in each student which is congruent with Brown’s (2018) research on leadership. Brown defined a leader as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes and who has the courage to develop that potential” (p. 4). Notably, Brown’s definition of leadership and its emphasis on finding and developing the potential of others supports the idea that Appreciative Advisers are indeed leaders on campus.

Looking back at my own career trajectory, I am grateful that our then Campus President at Broward College, Barbara J. Bryan, saw my potential and encouraged me to participate in our college's first Presidential Leadership Academy. This rewarding experience taught me the importance of networking and building meaningful relationships with students, colleagues, faculty, and administrators from different departments and campuses. Because she saw my potential as future leader, I have been paying forward that gift by encouraging my colleagues to further their education or learn new skills for personal enrichment or professional development. I do so by asking my colleagues open-ended questions to learn about their interests, past success, skills, and aspirations, so we can co-create a plan of action that aligns with their short- and long-term goals.

## Gratitude

The second component of the Appreciative Mindset that is congruent with Brown's research is the importance of gratitude. As Bloom et al. (2008) noted, an Appreciative Adviser possesses a grateful attitude to have the privilege of helping students to achieve their dreams. Brown (2018) also talked about the importance of reflecting on the blessings in one's life, including the people who are there for support. To prompt individuals to identify the people in their lives whose opinions matter to them, Brown suggested creating a "Square Squad" The concept is to "get a one-inch by one-inch piece of paper and write down the names of the people whose opinions of you matter" (Brown, 2018, p. 22). After editing the list of people to fit on the 1" by 1" square, she instructed people to send a thank you message to the people on the square to let them know how much one appreciates their honesty and authenticity.

When I first did the "Square Squad" activity, I must admit I was shocked by how small the piece of paper was. I had a hard time narrowing my list to only a few names that could fit on the square, as I am grateful to have a large support system. Regardless, I completed the task and here are the people who compose my "Square Squad": Jennifer L. Bloom, Barbara J. Bryan, Kay Francis, Olivia Sarson, and Cristobal Salinas, Jr. I am grateful to each of these people for encouraging, guiding, seeing my potential, believing in me, and helping me realize that my voice matters.

## Continually Hone Your Craft

The third component of the Appreciative Mindset involves committing to continuously improving one's skills (Bloom et al., 2008). By demonstrating to students one's commitment to self-improvement, one can lead by example and show students what it means to become true lifelong learners. This commitment to self-improvement is congruent with Brown's advice on staying engaged, curious, and connected. She emphasized that perfection is not the goal; rather, one must "let go of the fear of saying the wrong thing, the need to fix it, and the desire to offer the perfect response that cures everything" (Brown, 2018, p. 150). One must be reminded that instead of being knowers, it is far more important to be learners.

This commitment to learning instead of a commitment to defending what one knows has helped me to build better interactions with my diverse student population. I enjoy learning through asking Discover questions about each student's cultural background and traditions. Therefore, I intentionally share my own culture and stories through the pictures and artwork in my office and by sharing my own heritage with them. I am authentic and vulnerable with the students which opens up space for them to share their own stories. By creating a safe space for students and being genuinely curious about my students, I try to live out Brown's (2020) statement on her podcast, "I am not here to be right. I am here to get it right" (15:17).

## Remember Your Power

The fourth component of the Appreciative Mindset is remembering the power that academic advisors possess (Bloom et al., 2008). Although advisors might feel that they do not have as much power or influence as other staff, faculty, or administrators, students often assume advisors have a tremendous amount of power over them. With power comes the responsibility to use the power that advisors have for good and not evil (Bloom, personal communication). The words advisors choose are as important as the use of "deficit language, [which] can lead to deficit thinking" (Hammond, 2013, p. 18). Advisors need to ensure that the messages they convey are not unintentionally harmful to students, especially when students share their dreams for the future.

Unquestionably, students want to feel they belong and are respected during advising appointments. Although most advisors do not purposefully intend to hurt students with their words, it is important for advisors to stay vigilant and aware of their own blind spots. As Brown (2018) explained:

As daring leaders, we have to stay curious about our own blind spots and how to pull those issues into view, and we need to commit to helping the people we serve find their blind spots in a way that's safe and supportive. (p. 113)

In other words, one must invest time to attend to one's own fears and feelings and identify one's own unproductive behaviors. For example, suppose I need to have a conversation with a student who has not submitted their assignments by the due date. If I am having a hectic day and ignore my stressful mental state, I might assume that the student does not care about their studies or take the assignments seriously. Identifying my own tendency to be judgmental of other people allows me to redirect my focus and instead become curious about why personal, work, or other responsibilities might be precluding the student from completing the assignment.

### **Be Insatiably Curious**

The fifth component of the Appreciative Mindset is to demonstrate that one cares by being insatiably curious about students' stories (Bloom, 2008). Appreciative Advisers know that they have much to learn from their students and one of the best ways to learn from them is by asking good questions and then carefully listening to their answers. Brown's research on psychological safety resonates deeply with the Appreciative Mindset's insatiably curious component. Brown (2018) stated that although learning and sharing from each other deepens our relationships with people, one must be mindful that people expect others to be good listeners, which can be achieved, in part, by staying curious.

I try to live out this commitment to curiosity when working with students who are sharing a personal challenge they are experiencing. Once they share the challenge, the first thing I do is to thank them for trusting me enough to share their situation. Although I ask follow-up questions to learn more about the challenge, I also understand that students have boundaries, and I need to respect and stay attuned to their level of comfort in sharing further details. I also am mindful not to jump in and fix the situation for them, yet I do ask questions to ensure that I can refer the student to appropriate resources both on- and off-campus.

### **Be Culturally Aware and Responsive**

The sixth component of the Appreciative Mindset is being culturally aware and responsive in one's interactions with students (Bloom et al., 2008). As the student population has become increasingly diverse, advisors must acknowledge differences among students with regard to race, ethnicity, social class, gender, age, sexual orientation, culture, ableism, and religious traditions. Advisors must constantly reflect on their own identities, privileges, and biases. Each student is unique; students who on the surface may appear to have the same backgrounds, might not have the same customs, strengths, struggles, and/or challenges. If one genuinely wants to meet students where they are, one must first be equipped to have the growth mindset to get ready to unlearn any prejudice, assumptions, stereotypes, or biases and relearn different perspectives and facts.

Brown (2020) is a committed social justice advocate and has addressed difficult societal issues, such as racism and its relationship to shame, in her podcast. She noted that shame is a fear of disconnection that causes real pain and can be a tool of oppression. She noted the need to hold people accountable for racist words and actions and that accountability

is not the same thing as shaming people for being a racist (Brown, 2020). In other words, she encouraged her audience to build shame resilience by holding themselves accountable for their actions, unlearning their own biases, and learning to have compassion and empathy.

As an Asian woman during the COVID-19 pandemic's rise in anti-Asian hate, I can relate to the pain and anger associated with racist behavior. Yet, Brown's (2021) work reminds me that anger is "an emotion that we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, and justice" (p. 224). I commit to embracing diversity because it allows me to learn and engage people from all backgrounds, and my hope is that by living out these values, I will inspire my students to embrace diversity, too.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined the six components of the Appreciative Mindset (i.e., care about and believe in the potential of each student, practice gratitude, continually hone one's craft, remember your power, be insatiable and curious, and be culturally aware and responsive) and the congruency between the Advising Mindset and Brown's research on courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. If one desires more love, joy, and belonging in one's personal, academic, and professional lives, one should strive to live out the Appreciative Mindset and the recommendations from Brown's research every day.

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