Appreciative Education in Action: Positive Change in Higher Education

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Abstract

There is no shortage of need regarding areas of opportunity for positive change in higher education. One university's approach to enacting change and continuous improvement in the area of mission alignment across all graduate program curricula was evaluated for theoretical connections to the Appreciative Education (AE) framework to establish overlap and congruence with the tenets of the framework. The current theory-to-practice article includes suggestions for future research regarding ways to determine empirical findings and further the body of knowledge on the AE framework in the context of higher education.

Keywords

Appreciative Education, higher education, change, improvement

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are organizations that are guided by and evaluated according to their unique identity and mission (Higher Learning Commission, 2024). The changes required for aligning mission with practice can be challenging for HEIs. A paradigm gaining traction, Appreciative Education (AE), offers a unique perspective on institutional change by emphasizing strengths, positive potential, and collaborative inquiry (Bloom et al., 2013). This article explores the potential of AE-informed faculty reading groups as an effective tool for fostering institutional change and enhancing missional alignment at one university.

By combining the power of AE and faculty reading groups, HEIs can create a generative space where faculty can reflect on the organization's strengths, engage in collaborative inquiry, create a shared vision for the future, and equip members with tools to implement change. AE, a strengths-based approach to organizational change, is rooted in the belief that individuals and organizations are rich with positive potential and can inspire innovation (Bloom & McClellan, 2016). Within the field of higher education, change is inevitable. A proactive and positive approach to change can provide a launching pad for buy-in and success. Faculty reading groups provide a structured platform for faculty to engage in critical dialogue, share insights, and collectively explore new ideas, with the discussion being the conduit rather than the outcome as it would be in other reading groups (Faculty reading group improves teaching methods, 2015). That is, reading groups offer a systematic way to deepen content knowledge and enhance reflective practice, thereby translating to improved student learning (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). Further, faculty reading groups are aligned with the social science concept of infinite improvability (Smith & Spooner, 2021). We followed a case study design, based on one university's utilization of a faculty reading group, to identify potential opportunities and best practices for future implementation.

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Purpose

The work of enacting change can be challenging for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) because of the diverse range of schools or colleges, programs, and student populations. The Appreciative Education (AE) framework, based on Appreciative Inquiry (Whitney & Cooperrider, 1990), Appreciative Advising (Bloom & Martin, 2002), and the Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2013), supports collaboration, professional development, and pedagogical advancements in the direction of both individual and collective goals and is a useful framework for creating the level of buy-in necessary for positive pivoting (Nelson et al., 2021). The student experience is the ultimate goal for HEIs, and a faculty reading group is one method for concentrating ideas and ultimately actions in the direction of student-facing outcomes (Faculty reading group improves teaching methods, 2015). When combined, the AE framework provides the why and a faculty reading group provides the how to enact the kind of institutional change that impacts the student experience.

Theoretical Framework

Research on HEI effectiveness has been bolstered by the introduction of the Appreciative Education (AE) framework (Elsberry, 2022; Hursh, 2023) and we aim to further the body of knowledge by drawing connections between the six phases of AE (Bloom et al., 2013) and the merits of utilizing a faculty reading group. Reading groups are essentially a place where Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural view of learning comes to life in that cognitive development emerges from collaborative interactions (Leal, 1993). For example, professional development reading groups have been used as a way for educators to increase their understanding of national standards (Lewis, 2019). It is understood that reading discussion environments accomplish pedagogical tasks, even in asynchronous formats (Gibson, 2009). A recent qualitative study found there is both simplicity and depth that can be achieved through reading groups focused on professional learning (Cooper et al., 2022). Additional layers of clarity can be discovered and applied when discussions flow from purposeful and theoretical footings which ultimately provide potential pathways to suggestions for future research directions (Bringmann et al., 2022).

Appreciative Education

The Appreciative Education (AE) framework is grounded in social constructivism, positive psychology, and Appreciative Inquiry (Bloom et al., 2013). AE is focused on advancing high-quality education that benefits individual learners as well as learning institutions (Bloom et al., 2013), which is no small aim. A secondary focus is the work of co-creating goals that are both intentional and geared toward positive outcomes (Bloom et al., 2013). The AE framework outlines six phases as a roadmap: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (see Figure 1). Each phase will be further described in the following *Appreciative Education in Action* section, where they are applied to a real-world context with specific action steps taken by one university.

Figure 1

Phases of Appreciative Education

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Appreciative Education in Action

The AE framework, when combined with purposeful action, can be used to bring about high-level change. We suggest that the tasks and outcomes associated with a faculty reading group align with the phases of AE when the goal is to advance progress regarding change in the direction of HEI improvements and or initiatives and to do so with positive intent. The following sections will draw interconnections between the theoretical foundation of AE and the purposeful outcomes that come with a well-intentioned and carefully executed faculty reading group.

One Institutional Initiative

Although the AE framework is traditionally described as a holistic approach rather than a step-by-step methodology (Bloom et al., 2013), organizational context "involves the use of resources that are available within the environment to accomplish specific tasks or outcomes through the actions of people within and beyond the immediate environment" (Bloom & McClellan, 2016, p. 202). This article, therefore, describes how the AE framework can be strategically utilized to find congruence with institutional processes, which, in this case, is the use of a faculty reading group to develop missional alignment within graduate programs at one university. A faculty reading group encourages changes in teaching reflection and practice, forges social connections between colleagues across campus, engages dialogue and critical thinking, and facilitates collaborative learning and self-development (Glushko et al., 2023; Grenier et al., 2021; Moncrieff & Coria-Navia, 2018). In the case of one university, the provost's office initiated a task force to identify ways of further strengthening institutional identity in their graduate programs through specific integration into the curriculum. An academic dean was appointed as the head of this graduate identity initiative group. Although the AE framework was not intentionally applied at the time, we describe the university's initiative using the AE framework phases as theoretical support for project effectiveness and positive outcomes. The six phases of the AE framework (see Figure 1) are Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle and will be discussed in that order.

Disarm

Demonstrating competence, integrity, and consistency is essential for creating a safe environment that leads to trust-building, which is "especially important in higher education settings where there is a general lack of trust between faculty, staff, and administrators" (Bloom & McClellan, 2016, p. 198). Reading groups engender trust and support as learners wonder aloud and share concerns or insights (Potenza-Radis, 2008). By using trust-building behaviors such as active listening and engaging emotional intelligence, administrators are able to form a welcoming climate that allows the group members to be vulnerable and open to change – in line with a phase known within the AE context as Disarm (Bloom & McClellan, 2016). The academic dean spearheading the graduate identity reading group sought to establish trust in this process by asking departments to select their own representatives to join the group and inviting participants to share any specific missional identity gaps or desires faced by each of the represented departments. Clear goals were proactively shared, and a general idea of the time commitment was also provided as steps to further disarm and address any areas of confusion or frustration.

Discover

At the institutional level, the Discover phase is for individuals to "situate themselves within the best of the larger organizational context and identify why they are proud of their connection to the organization" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 8). Because reading groups are effective for professional learning (Cooper et al., 2022), the dean selected a book for the group to read as a calibration effort that could provide the larger organizational context in order for the 16 members representing every graduate program to support and encourage one another in the broader initiative. This calibration effort consisted of a reading schedule and five meetings over the course of a 16-week semester where open dialogue provided for fruitful discussion. Discussion prompts were provided ahead of time so that the work of discovering could begin at the individual level and then move toward collective discovery.

Dream

The Dream phase highlights the importance of uncovering shared organizational vision that can guide positive change, drawing from differing settings within the institution (Bloom et al., 2013). At the conclusion of the readings, an all-day retreat was scheduled to envision what missional identity could look like in online courses across all 16 programs, what kinds of topics could be addressed, and how those could be integrated into the modular format of existing courses. Participants were encouraged to "dream big" and a tone of inclusivity was established to ensure all voices were heard and all programs represented. The positive tone that was set aligns with the AE framework regarding positive intent and the reading group setting allows time and space for sharing of ideas.

Design

The Design phase is a socially constructed plan of action "where individual strengths are aligned to achieve both individual and shared dreams" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 9). Rooted in what was learned during the reading group calibration, the second semester's all-day retreat resulted in the development of 12 broad module topics that could be used across various disciplines. Based on individual strengths and expertise, these topics were divided and distributed to develop initial scripts. At the beginning of the third semester of this project, after a summer-long break for script writing, the team met again for a group discussion on first-draft scripts and to provide direction for script writers. The hour-long meeting produced valuable feedback for writers as it pertained to the content's usefulness and to the intended

audience regarding understanding of the material. The notes were compiled by the project director and disseminated to the script writers so they could continue editing for the duration of the semester. At the beginning of the fourth semester, select readers from different schools representing the original 16 academic programs were brought together over Zoom to begin evaluating completed scripts for usefulness in the programs, overall readiness, and areas for improvement or clarity.

Deliver

The Deliver phase entails action planning for how the design phase is or should be executed (Bloom et al., 2013). At this point, the reading group ended and the practical execution began. The script writers completed their modules and a menu of said modules was made available from which the departments could choose. The individual departments, from which the original reading group members hailed, were given the autonomy and responsibility to implement the delivered modules into their existing courses. This form of execution was designed to be a convenient "plug-and-play" opportunity, anticipating that further opportunity to fully integrate the modules would follow according to the needs of each department or school.

Don't Settle

The Don't Settle phase embodies the principle of what seasoned educators would call continuous improvement. Bloom et al. (2013) described this phase as an iterative process that focuses on consistently seeking to improve rather than remaining static. In the graduate identity initiative, *Don't Settle* meant going beyond a simple module insertion for meeting minimum missional alignment goals to fully integrating those missional aspects in content-specific application according to each department's discipline. As part of a fully integrated curriculum, the missional content would be included in annual assessments of learning outcomes in the direction of continuous improvement efforts.

Implications

There are myriad ways to apply the AE framework in the planning and execution stages from the vantage point of HEI administration, school-level deans, or groups of practitioners. Although we applied this approach to an event that was previously planned and executed, proactively incorporating AE principles from a project's outset offers significant potential benefits, including greater clarity and more purposeful direction. For example, a round table of deans, considered the highest-ranking administrators at the school or college level, might plan a reading group activity around the need for injecting institutional norms regarding AI use. A team of curriculum developers creating a brand-new program could select a book focused on adult learners and use a faculty reading group to engage in the AE steps of Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle prior to starting the project. Certainly, there are other implications to consider regarding the efficacy of a faculty reading group in support of positive change and great momentum in the direction of AE in higher education.

Conclusions and Forward Motion

We aligned a specific initiative with the AE framework phases as one example of the framework in action. Although empirical findings were not the goal of the current article, there is room for future research in the direction of quantitative and/or qualitative results. Pre- and post-test results before and after an AE-focused intervention could determine the significance of the framework regarding workplace phenomena. Additionally, perceptions of intervention participants could be coded for themes to describe the framework's efficacy.

One outcome of this article was to connect practice to theory, highlighting the need for additional research to continue making theoretical connections in the areas of mission alignment and institutional change.

The goal of this article was to show a clear progression or implementation of the AE framework within the context of a specific HEI initiative, in this case, institutional change in the area of enhancing missional alignment in graduate programs across all schools and disciplines. The AE framework was the foundation for one university's approach to enacting change and progress in a positive direction through the Graduate Identity Initiative. To show theoretical connections to specific action steps, we connected initiative steps with the six AE phases to determine alignment with the framework and describe the forward motion using a theoretical foundation. We suggest a call for future research, to include empirical findings, in order to continue the work of establishing AE as efficacious in the context of higher education, specific to the areas of mission alignment and overall improvement in a determined area of opportunity.

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