Implementing Appreciative Education in a First-Year Seminar

Peter C. Mather[1] and Tessa M. Smith[2]

Abstract

Appreciative Education involves intentionally designing educational approaches that are based on principles of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. This paper presents findings from a study of the meaning that 15 first-year experience course instructors attributed to implementing positivity interventions in their courses at a large, Midwestern university. The study suggests that these interventions, which fall under the umbrella of Appreciative Education, can disrupt conventional classroom expectations and dynamics. These disruptions can result in spaces of openness and vulnerability among instructors and students. Finally, the applications increase student engagement, support student success, and shape instructors' thinking about teaching practices.

Keywords

appreciative education, first-year, pedagogy

First-year seminars are a cornerstone of many institutions' efforts to facilitate students' successful transitions to college. Identified as a high impact practice (Kuh, 2008), first-year seminars are widely used to support students as they navigate a new institution and a new culture (Jessup-Anger, 2011). Recognizing the importance of psychological well-being as a contributor to student success (Schreiner, 2010a, 2010b), we examined the effectiveness of applying research-proven strategies to support emotional well-being among students enrolled in first-year seminar courses at a research university.

Since their inception, first-year seminars have varied in purpose and scope (Murray & Summerlee, 2007). The original academic first-year seminar began as an experimental program at the University of South Carolina in 1972 following the Vietnam War (Higgins, 2010). The purpose of the course was to decrease tensions after the activism and unrest of the 1960's. In that context, they were designed to build trust within the campus community and "to increase positive attitudes and behaviours towards the institution, enhance retention, communicate the value of education, and improve teaching in undergraduate programs" (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015, p. 156). While society and student populations have changed since the inception of first-year seminars, this high impact practice has grown in popularity and has been adapted to support today's students.

[1] Ohio University, OH, United States
[2] The Ohio State University, OH, United States
Corresponding Author: Peter C. Mather, Email: matherp@ohio.edu

Since the launch of the University of South Carolina seminar experiment, institutions have expanded and supported the widespread implementation of first-year seminar courses and even have cultivated a wealth of research on the first-year experience as a whole. In fact, the National Survey of First-Year Seminars (NRCFYEST, 2013) indicates that about 90% of the 896 institutions surveyed offer a first-year seminar. The momentum around first-year seminars led to the development of the National Research Center for the Freshman Year Experience in 1986 which eventually expanded into the National Research Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRCFYEST) (Hickinbottom-Brawn & Burns, 2015).

First-year seminars commonly address a wide range of needs, including introducing students to campus resources, study skills, campus culture, and health and safety information. While these topics are important for new college students, they merely scratch the surface of what can be accomplished in high impact developmental classrooms. Not only can first-year seminar instructors engage students in learning about campus resources, but they also can create opportunities for students to think critically, connect socially, and develop emotionally.

Given the history and widespread practice of first-year seminars, educators across the U.S. are charged with meeting the diverse psychosocial needs of first-year students, and will continue to support new students through this high impact practice for the foreseeable future. An appreciative education approach (Bloom et al., 2013) to working with students in transition can support educators in teaching their first-year seminar curriculum through a lens that invites students to build upon their strengths, share their stories, and develop success strategies during a critical transition.

Fostering Emotional Well-being Through Educational Practice

Considerable higher education scholarship has acknowledged that student success depends on a wide range of personal and environmental factors (Tinto,1993). Chickering and Reisser (1993), Perry (1970), and Sedlacek (1991) are among the foundational scholars contributing to the idea that student success requires more than academic skills, but also psychosocial maturity, as well as supportive environmental conditions. More recently, Schreiner (2010a) asserted that more students fail or drop out of college due to a lack of engagement than due to academic ability. Other researchers have tied positive psychological characteristics to student success; characteristics include: Grit (Duckworth, 2016); self-efficacy (Bandura, 2010); hope (Snyder, 2000); optimism (Seligman, 1990) and strengths use (Gallup, 2017). Broadly speaking, these theoretical models associated with leveraging human strengths offer pathways for educational interventions that take into account vital noncognitive success characteristics.

Bloom et al. (2013) framed the notion of applying human strengths and building on what *is* working, in contrast to a deficit-based approach, as *appreciative education*. They described appreciative education as:

> . . . a framework for delivering high-quality education on both an individual and organizational level. It provides an intentional and positive approach to bettering educational enterprises by focusing on the strengths and potential of individuals and organizations to accomplish co-created goals. (pp. 5 - 6)

Bloom et al. (2013) asserted that student success should be about more than retention, pointing out that retention means simply to hold in place. They stated, "Rather than holding students in place, higher education is positioned to help students become their best selves and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 5). This principle expressed by Bloom and her colleagues is consistent with the goals of appreciative inquiry, a forerunner of appreciative education.

In Appreciative Inquiry terms, effective organizational change approaches also focus on what is "life giving." This same principle can be applied to individual thriving. That is, achieving one's personal best comes through leveraging one's present strengths and building on prior successes and high point experiences. Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2011) serve as foundations for Appreciative Education (Bloom et al., 2013). Both theoretical frames emerged in the 1990's as approaches to counter the dominant deficit-based strategies to personal and organizational improvement.

Positive Psychology, in particular, provides the theoretical framework for this study. Seligman (2011) explained that psychological well-being is supported by 5 pillars, illustrated through the acronym, PERMA: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments. The positive psychology-based approach used in this study draws from this model. Barbara Fredrickson (2004) has tied Seligman's first pillar, positive emotions, to the learning process in the Broaden and Build theory. She contended that positive emotions correlate with creative problem solving, particularly in situations that can be psychologically threatening. In contrast to the broadening qualities of positive emotions, the most fundamental negative emotion, fear, is known for presenting limited behavioral options (i.e., fight or flight). In the midst of positive emotional experiences, people tend to be able to entertain a multitude of creative alternatives when faced with challenges, such as the transition to college.

Fredrickson and other positive psychologists noted that positive psychology is distinguished from self-help based on its grounding in empirical research (Fredrickson, 2004; Seligman, 2002). This stream of psychological research focuses on understanding permutations of well-being (e.g., positive emotion, engagement, meaning and purpose), while also understanding how to increase one's well-being through behavior and cognition. Scholars including Achor (2010), Biswas-Diener (2010), and Lyubomirsky (2007) have provided clear examples of approaches to leverage those findings into individual activities and exercises that promote well-being. Some of these practices are incorporated into this study.

This study involves a set of positivity-inducing interventions based on the foundations of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. Over the course of a semester, 15 first-year seminar instructors at a large research university agreed to implement at least 3 appreciative exercises, which had empirical support for inducing positive emotions. Following the end of the semester, we interviewed the instructors to gain an understanding of the results, meaning, and value the instructors attributed to implementing these exercises, as well as the pedagogical methods or applications that the instructors found to be most effective.

Method

We employed a basic interpretive qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Basic qualitative research blends strategies growing out of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. The approach is phenomenological in orientation in that the focus is on the lived experience of the participants. In this study, we employed interviews to ascertain the lived experience and meaning participants made of their implementation of appreciative education strategies. Symbolic interactionists acknowledge the social interactions of people and symbols of meaning and salience within a community. In this study, we were interested in how implementing these strategies and the collective meaning made attributed to these activities shaped the experiences and behaviors of members of the classroom environments.

Study Overview

The participants were instructors in the first-year seminar program at a large, public university in the Midwest. The seminar was a traditional extended-orientation style seminar with a shared curriculum across over 200 sections. With few programmatic exceptions, the course was required for all first-year students, and it was a part of a cluster of shared courses. We introduced the study during the instructor orientation program in the spring semester prior to the fall intervention. Approximately 40 interested participants joined the optional session in which we described the study. Of those 40 participants, 15 instructors elected to participate in the study, which involved applying at least three appreciative education interventions that were identified and described in detail on a Blackboard (course management system) site. The instructors included professional staff members, faculty, and graduate students. Some sections were team taught.

The appreciative education interventions were derived from positive psychology literature (Achor, 2010; Bissau-Diener, 2010; Lyubomirsky, 2007). We reviewed literature and developed 15 different interventions, broken down into five categories: Compassion, Gratitude, Happiness, Resilience, and Strengths & Flow. The strategies are summarized in the Appendix to this article. In addition to creating a Blackboard site with resources for participants, we also held a mid-semester meeting of participating instructors with the primary purpose of their sharing perspectives and support for their peers who were involved in the study.

Data Collection

We employed two forms of data collection. Participants were asked to complete a brief written reflection of their experience with the activities after each implementation. In addition to the written reflections, we conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with each participating instructor after the semester in which the strategies were employed. The interview protocol grew out of the research question guiding the study: What meaning did the instructors make of intentional, appreciative education strategies in the classroom? We were particularly interested in their perceptions of how the strategies shaped the classroom environment, the experience of students, and their experience as instructors. The primary data source was the interview. All 15 participating instructors were interviewed.

Data Analysis

We conducted the initial data analysis by, first, reading through each interview transcription. After reading through each transcription, we conducted initial coding (Saldana, 2015), which involved identifying and labeling sections, often at the level of paragraphs, sections of each transcript that contained information pertinent to our study. After the original coding, we conducted axial coding, in which we examined the relationships among the codes. We then reviewed the written reflections, incorporating them into the themes identified through the interviews. As suggested by Charmaz (2014), we chose action-oriented themes that highlight processes engaged in by the participants. The trustworthiness of this study was strengthened through member-checking. Specifically, we employed a version of member checking described by Birt et al. (2016) in which selected participants respond to the thematic analysis. Following the development of themes, we shared a summary of the findings with four participants and received their feedback. The participants supported the summary analysis. Thus, no changes were made based on the member checking.

Findings

The findings are organized around the following themes: Implementing Novel Pedagogical Approaches; Reaping the Benefits; and Shaping Instructors' Work. The themes are based on the participating instructors' accounts of the application of appreciative education strategies.

Implementing Novel Pedagogical Approaches

Several instructors commented that applying the appreciative education approaches initially created some discomfort both for them and for students. Whether tacit or explicit, students come to college with expectations of what college classes are or should be like. Participants in this study noted that the appreciative education exercises initially seemed uncomfortable and unusual for both the instructors and the students in contrast to their prior classroom experiences due to the personal, reflective nature of discussion and journal prompts.

Brittney attributed some of students' initial resistance to the personal nature of appreciative education exercises. She explained, "They were just like, 'Why are we doing this?' Because they're like, 'Why do you care so much about me?' And it's like we really do care, and they're like not used to that." John also noted a degree of resistance from some students: "I think that students at first kind of had like their cool hats on, or they kind of pushed it off, but then as it became more routinized over time, not only did they accept it, but I think they actually enjoyed the exercises."

Significant reflection activities, both private and public, were embedded in the appreciative education exercises. Dominique explained the difference between other educational experiences and some of the initial responses to the appreciative approach: "Because they're not generally asked to reflect or think about themselves— who they are, what's their motivation, what do they want out of life— those kinds of large questions, they were taken aback." Cami echoed a similar perspective, when she said, "I just think that it was not necessarily a way that they are used to considering different things in their lives."

Johanna attributed some of the resistance to the maturity of students. She also highlighted the point that not all seminar sections are the same, despite shared curricular themes. Her class was comprised of students who had not been accepted into their initial, desired major and college (i.e., the College of Business); they were required to enroll in a specific section of the seminar. Most other seminars were enrolled by students who were exploring their interests and had not yet identified a major. Her implication was that the maturity level or disposition about being in the seminar could vary across sections even though they were all traditional-age, first year students.

The instructors for the classes had varying levels of experience. Some were teaching a college class for the first time; others were experienced, having taught dozens of such seminar courses. Cami, a graduate assistant and instructor, was teaching the course for the first time, and represented the perspective of several of the participants with little teaching experience. She posed: "How are they going to respond to this? Are they going to think I'm super cheesy? I definitely needed some prompting from my co-instructor to be like, 'Cami, let's just try it out. . . I think they'll respond well.'"

While some of the instructors pointed out the challenges of implementing the approaches, others discussed the seamlessness and early benefits of the appreciative approaches. Matthew described this type of experience. While noting that conventions of learning in high school and often in college are to just rely on the instructor to drive the class dynamic, Matthew stated:

> When you are using these exercises the students are really shaping the conversation. . . . I could come to class with expectations, but if a student shared a story or shared an example . . . about someone they value or talking about an experience they value or an experience they learned from that is what is going to shape the conversation in class. In a way the students were kind of in control of the way the class went and the direction it went.

Thus, the appreciative education approaches required some nimbleness and adaptability on the part of instructors.

In summary, participants commonly reported some unease among both students and instructors when they first implemented the appreciative education exercises. On the other hand, in some cases these exercises quickly reaped benefits and shaped instructional approaches, as suggested by Matthew's example. These differences are likely to be related to both the instructors' confidence as well as the different levels of readiness of the students in the respective course sections. Finally, complex interactions between instructors' approaches and student characteristics also were likely to enter into the degree of initial success.

Establishing a Foundation for Class Engagement and Student Well-being

Despite some of the early challenges with implementing these activities, the inclusion of appreciative education exercises helped to build strong foundations for student engagement throughout the semester. For example, Dominique noted that the students often hit their stride with the activities.

> So, I would say they first time we did a reflection piece they gave me quite a bit of pushback. But as that came to be part of our curriculum and our class environment, I got feedback that some of those activities we did were actually some of the best, their most memorable parts of the class.

Dominique went on to say that the appreciative education approaches "opened pathways for us to have more meaningful conversations about what they want, what they don't want, what they're afraid of because they don't know what they want."

John also indicated that doing these positive activities helped prepare students for more challenging discussions, like diversity, later in the semester. He shared:

> I think that having these sorts of exercises allow for students to, one, look and learn into their own values [and] characteristics. Two, safely practice those in a setting where it can be practiced. And so I think that having these exercises spread throughout the semester really set us up perfectly for when we had those talks later in the semester about critical thinking or higher level decision making, diversity. By the time we got there, they had done a lot of these introspective practices or exercises that they felt confident in.

Matthew noted the ways in which the appreciative exercises introduced students to a constructivist approach to learning, contrasting this kind of educational setting from their prior experiences.

> I think that using these exercises allowed students to think outside of the box a little bit. And with the box I mean ... I think when you're in high school classes, you come to class, it's biology class ... Okay, we are going to talk about biology and that is all we are going to talk about. And I don't think ... I think sometimes students just rely on the professor whoever the instructor is to tell them what to do, but when you are using these exercises the students are really shaping the conversation.

The appreciative exercises pushed up against some educational conventions. They also interrupted student stress, according to Lynn. "We did [the] *Three Good Things* [exercise] and that got a lot of positive feedback. . . They were feeling a little stressed, so a lot of them reported just feeling generally better because they got to reflect on those positive things."

Instructors' written reflections supported the retrospective accounts provided in their post-course interviews. They specifically noted the benefit of the compassion, gratitude, strengths, and resilience activities for creating a positive and connected atmosphere in the classroom. The compassion activity involved a reflection on performing an act of kindness. The instructors noted that students felt good about serving others. Furthermore, when they were able to identify specific benefits for the recipients of service, this strengthened the activities' contributions to their own well-being.

In respect to the gratitude exercise, students were asked to remember and then reach out to someone who was important in getting them to where they are in life. Several instructors cited this activity as a boost to class members and to the classroom climate. One instructor pointed out that starting the class with this activity had a positive effect on the rest of the class session. John wrote that the activity "got everyone awake and talking" and set the stage for the remainder of the class session.

Activities around strengths identification and an imagining of the "best possible self" was cited by multiple instructors as engaging some of the quieter members of class, as well as fostering connections among class members who had previously not interacted with each other. According to Tasha, "They were excited and energized. The students were talking with peers they had not interacted with before." According to the data, each of these positive experiences boosted the level of engagement in subsequent class sessions.

Shaping Instructors' Work

Cami noted that the exercises not only changed the classroom, but also changed instructors' approaches to teaching:

> Often times after we went through a specific activity, they'd want to actually share what they did, which again was not always common when we were doing other things on the syllabus such as fiscal literacy. I think that Abbi and I both really enjoyed it, and we were able to, reading the responses, learn a lot more about our students, which I think improved us as instructors.

Student reflections activities, both private and public, were commonly part of the appreciative exercises. Many of the instructors highlighted the value of the reflections both for building classroom community and individual student development and learning. Tasha noted that the appreciative orientation that was the thrust of the specific course interventions became part of her overall approach, including the manner in which she facilitated reflections. For example, she would ask them to reflect on their highlights--those activities that made them "happy"--and then she would ask them to consider ways to expand on and create more of those kinds of experiences.

Tasha's positive experiences with the students validated her identity as an instructor. Although students initially resisted the personal nature of the appreciative education activities, they and Tasha ultimately found them to be transformational. She explained the shift for the students, which also convinced her that the personal approach that was part of appreciative education was effective. She noted that after initially pushing back on the exercises:

> They eventually got to the point where they were complaining about their (other) professors not caring about them, not knowing their names. They were noticing these things and being upset about it, but they were like, at the beginning, why can't you just come in and teach and us leave early because that's what the rest of our professors do.

The students' positive response to the seminar class provided a significant boost for Tasha: "As somebody who really cares about genuinely helping my students, that's had a lot of personal impact on me and validating me and why I'm in this field and making me feel like extremely happy with my work." John echoed the positive sentiment.

> Pretty amazing to be part of this [learning] process for students: having this awakening of who they are, and that they can make decisions for themselves, and it's okay to want things out of life that don't follow this generic path.

Thus, awakening to the potential for learning produced by the appreciative exercises not only changed instructors' techniques, but their operating philosophy as facilitators of student self-authoring.

While these findings demonstrated a shift in philosophy, the instructors also learned lessons about tools that can be used to their advantage in teaching. Brittney noted that it helped to have a set of course activities available to them--especially ones that were so effective. She said,

> Like it was there all ready to go, and we just like implemented it . . . With everything else going on it was just easy to say like, "Hey, this is what we're doing," and not like having to plan something. But, I think like it really helped us, not only with the teaching part, like being our first time teaching, like having something to like fill the time, but also like just getting to know our students was really beneficial.

The appreciation for the structure and support seemed to be particularly beneficial for the new instructors. It is important to note that while instructors were provided tools, they were given considerable discretion in the study how and when to use them. Thus, they were engaged in a process of discernment and creativity regarding the employment of the tools. Also, as noted by Matthew, the instructors could employ flexibility, adapting to the interests and engagement levels of students. Because of the successful interactions built by many of the exercises, he was not inclined to overreact when things were not going well. He said:

> If I have a plan in mind I like to think that is the way things are going to go. If it [was] something that changed. . . I didn't freak out ... But I wasn't really expecting this to go in that direction . But I think something that I got good at was asking questions, and

> so a student would share a story or say something, I would say, okay can anyone else relate to this? And the people would say, yes I do or no I don't, or I would have them get in small groups. . . . I started building in space for different things to happen.

As a new instructor, Matthew learned to "create space" for students, feeling free to avoid exercising too much control in classroom discussions.

Matthew also noted that when students were consistently complaining about another course in their learning community cluster, he capitalized on orientation of appreciative education by redirecting their negativity:

> So, I know your math class is not going well, but what is going well? A lot of times it was reframing the conversation, and I think that helped them understand that things in life are not always going to go well. It's really about how you decide to handle it and how you frame that and how are you are going to overcome that, and really leverage the other strengths and things that are going well in life rather than just sitting around and focusing on all the things that are going poorly.

Discussion

The findings revealed several theoretical and practice-based considerations. In this section, we discuss the connections between the findings of this study and the research on leveraging positive emotions; considerations for integrating the interventions into a seminar program; the importance of using a critical, theory-based approach to applying strategies; the implications for the development of instructional approaches; and limitations of the study.

Leveraging Positive Emotions

According to Fredrickson's (2004) Broaden and Build theory, positive emotions provide a powerful foundation for creativity and learning by opening individuals to deep engagement in learning. This study supported this principle. As students engaged in appreciative activities, they opened up to new possibilities (particularly in the realm of careers), as well as new interpersonal connections. These same benefits came about by encouraging students to identify, acknowledge and apply their strengths. Carnevale and Ibsen (1986) highlighted the value of emotion-boosting exercises in challenging situations such as conflict mediation and diversity education. The first-year in college can be simultaneously exhilarating and daunting. In this context, providing activities focused on creating positive emotional and cognitive experiences holds promise for supporting students in this important life transition.

This study design allowed for gaining the global perceptions of instructors after the course was over as well as immediate responses based on their experiences with specific exercises in class. While the small number of participants does not provide a definitive portrait, there is evidence that certain kinds of appreciative activities produce unique individual and course outcomes. In particular, it seems that activities focused on identifying and interpreting individual strengths open up students who are generally more reserved to greater participation and sharing in the classroom. These preliminary findings can provide valuable guidance for course designers and instructors of seminar courses, particularly if similar findings occur in subsequent research.

Structural Integration

One of the striking aspects of this study was the way the educational interventions provoked new conceptions of learning among students and new ways of teaching for instructors. While the introduction of these strategies sometimes disrupted the conventions of traditional academic environments, the inclusion of the strategies appeared to be positive over time. In fact, it is notable that including these strategies did not interfere with other class goals and could be applied at different times throughout the semester effectively. That is, like many extended-orientation style first year seminars, the same syllabus, learning outcomes, and course topics are distributed across multiple sections of the course and to a variety of instructors. The course design left some flexibility that allowed for individual pedagogical approaches. Within this degree of structure, the inclusion of these additional activities appeared to be seamless, as represented by the feedback from instructors, and did not interfere with the learning objectives of the course.

Critical Considerations

Importantly, enacting appreciative education in the classroom means more than occasionally introducing techniques; rather, as noted by some participants, it is about changing the culture of the classroom to one of attending to what *is* working for students in their transitions as they navigate a new environment. There is evidence that successes brought about by the individual strategies used in the study became integrated into the classroom cultures.

The training for instructors participating in the study included a background on the theoretical framework of appreciative education and open discussion about potential limitations and impact on specific student populations. That is to say, instructors were not simply provided with a collection of isolated strategies but participated in two pre-study sessions and one session in the middle of the semester that introduced and refreshed the notion that appreciative education is fundamentally about leveraging assets as an alternative to deficit-based approaches. Also, individual interventions were contextualized in the overall frameworks of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry as part of the participant training.

The idea that appreciative education is not a mere set of strategies cannot be overstated. Positive psychology, in particular, emphasizes its foundation on empirical evidence (Seligman, 2002), thus avoiding the less rigorous and questionable guidance that sometimes is imbedded in the self-help movement. While evidence-based science that supports various well-being strategies is important in understanding possible paths to fulfillment, we echo the concerns raised by critical humanists such as Miller (2008) and Sugarman (2007) regarding the application of positive psychology to learning and, indeed, to life. According to Sugarman, if we over-rely on the findings and formulas of positive psychology, "we may become comfortable, if not contemplative; masterful, if not wise; resourceful, if not reverent; productive, if not inspired; and normalized, if not happy" (p. 195). This appreciative pedagogical approach should be adopted carefully and inclusively, and with opportunities for students' diverse identities, dreams, and interests to be supported and engaged.

Shaping Instruction

Most of the participants of this study (i.e., instructors) were novices. Unsurprisingly, the inclusion of appreciative education strategies had a bigger impact on their instructional strategies than it did their more experienced counterparts. With that said, even the more experienced instructors (i.e., Dominique and Johanna) also noted surprises in students' responses (both the challenging and the positive) to these approaches. In general, these approaches lent themselves to more democratic and organic learning. Bass (2012) has highlighted the movement toward learning environments that are less "controlled," as an outgrowth of participatory, web-based communities and technologies. Similarly, Gee (2004) discussed "affinity spaces," which are typically informal learning settings that lend themselves to deeper engagement than formal classrooms. The primary mark of affinity spaces is peer-to-peer learning, based on the valuing of the expertise of the students. While still residing in quasi-formal learning space of the seminar, the strengths-based activities and overall democratic orientation of appreciative education support the rich learning that resides in informal, affinity-based environments. One result of this reality is that instructors consider new paradigms of teaching and learning.

Limitations

There are some important limitations of this study. First, the level at which the interventions were applied varied considerably, from very modest to extensive. The instructors who chose to participate in the study only committed to introducing three interventions in the class over a 15-week semester. Some opted to include several more interventions in their classes. In addition, the manners in which instructors facilitated the discussion of these interventions varied greatly, with some using private reflections and others using more public discussions. These different techniques could result in substantial differences in how and the extent to which students might have responded to and learned from the interventions. In addition, these practices were applied at a single institution, so the culture of the seminar program and the institution certainly influenced the application of the Appreciative Education strategies.

Conclusion

This study points to success in applying appreciative education principles and practices to first-year seminars. The college experience is ripe with opportunities for students to explore, cultivate, and pursue their dreams in a supportive environment. Particularly in the contemporary context of mental-health challenges, an appreciative approach to education can begin to address the limiting effects of deficit-based learning, and can elevate students' voices, empowering them to flourish, discover new possibilities, and self-author their dreams alongside their peers. This study points to the potential for appreciative approaches to enhance meaningful reflection and inspiration in a classroom environment, notably as students are beginning their higher education journey.

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Appendix A Sample Appreciative Education Strategies

Acts of Kindness Strategy (Seligman, 2002)

1. Perform a significant or large act of kindness for someone (or 3 small things in one day).
2. In writing, describe what you did, how the other person reacted (if you witnessed the reaction), and how you felt. How long did the reaction last?
3. Reflect on how a meaningful act like this differs from a pleasurable one—like enjoying your favorite dessert.

Happiness/Positive Outlook Strategy (Achor, 2010)

1. Watch Shawn Achor's TedTalk during or outside of class: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXy__kBVq1M
2. Respond to the following journal prompt: Shawn Achor points out that simple exercises for changing one's outlook can make a powerful impact on an individual's success. After listening to Achor's video and looking at the website, happinessadvantage.com, what specific ideas to you have for altering your outlook?
3. Write an action plan for altering your outlook.

Gratitude Strategy (Lyubomirsky, 2007):

1. Think of someone who has helped you get to where you are today—someone who has a made a positive influence on your life. This could be a friend, family member, or mentor.
2. Turn to the person sitting next to you and share for a moment who your helpful person is and what about them was so influential.
3. (Whole class debrief): What was it like to talk about this persona and experience with a partner? How did it feel to listen to your partner's experience?

4. *Optional Follow-Up Activity: Send a note to this person, expressing appreciation to them for the positive influence they've had on your life. This act of appreciation can enrich your relationship and generate positive emotions for both parties.

Best Possible Self Strategy (Biswas-Diener, 2010)
1. Imagine your best possible self 10 years from now. What are you doing? How are you living out your values? Who is in your life and what is life like for you?
2. Write a description of your best possible self 10 years from now.
3. Identify goals for the next year that will help you move toward your best possible self.
4. What can you do in college to move toward this reality? What might stand in the way? How might you overcome potential barriers?