Appreciative Inquiry: An approach to distance learning in Community Engagement, Intercultural Dialogue and Global Citizenship

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Research Question
Does social e-media provide an appropriate environment for learning about Community Engagement, Intercultural Dialogue and Global Citizenship?

Methodology
Appreciative action learning was used as the research method for exploring this question throughout the development of this course.

A distance-learning course was developed and piloted during the academic year 2009-2010. The course was based in BlackBoard, a virtual learning environment, and included tutor input via PowerPoint, purpose-built web-pages, short videos and papers, on-line resources, including external websites and journal articles and various forms of communication with other learners involved in implementing a community-based project. 72 international students took part in the pilot.

What we learned from the pilot
- to reduce stress on course participants we reduced assessment demands and fees by making the course a 10 credit unit
- to provide more focus to the course, we concentrated the follow-up course on Appreciative Inquiry and Community Engagement, with intercultural dialogue and global citizenship introduced as potential project themes rather than core content.
- Students had to articulate readiness to participate which helped to generate their commitment from the start.

Structure of the course
The four sections follow an Appreciative Inquiry cycle.

Discovery
- Identifying strengths
- Values and Principles
- Community Engagement
- Intercultural Dialogue

Destiny
- Project settings
- Learning Journal
- Appreciative Inquiry
- Evidencing sustainable applications

Design
- Realising dreams
- Tools for Practice
- Workshops
- Community Development Learning

Dream
- Inspirational Community Projects
- Values and Principles

Findings
The research shows that despite multi-level technology and diverse sources of learning materials offered to students that the power of the course was in the Questions posed. The appreciative inquiry approach stimulated learners’ discussions related to simple scenarios, short questionnaires and case study examples where they reflected on their own experience and understanding and identified common ground. Appreciative Inquiry is shown to offer an appropriate pedagogy for distance learning and a skill for lifelong learning.

We found that the Appreciative Inquiry approach enhanced community engagement, fostered inter-cultural community inquiry dialogue and promoted global citizenship within the group of learners. It was also evident that the spirit of dialogue was extended to the individual project work and highlighted as a valued learning outcome.

We expect future course participants to continue to contribute to the course development and sharing of learning outcomes. We will continue to build Community Engagement, Intercultural Dialogue and Global Citizenship through the course experience.