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Teaching & Learning

# Appreciative inquiry in management education: measuring the success of co-created learning

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**Abstract**
This paper reviews Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and its potential contribution to creating classrooms desired by all participants. It addresses the question of personal contribution to the creation of that which is identified by those responsible for its creation. A brief review of AI's history and the fundamental ideas behind its practice is followed by a detailed step-by-step approach of how it is applied to a graduate class in Leadership and Management Development. The exercise is situated in the context of student directed learning and the positive possibilities of this exercise in students' lives. Statistical analysis of a survey created from the identified outcomes is presented. The survey was administered on two occasions over the semester to measure the extent to which the class had accomplished the ideals, and a self-report of students' contribution to that achievement. Results show a significant relationship between those items that are deemed high priority for the course and students' assessment of achievement and their contribution to that achievement. Conclusions and implications are included with some questions posed for further research and practice.
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**Keywords:** appreciative inquiry; evaluation; graduate education


## Introduction

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987) has been identified as a classroom tool to help create educational experiences that engage students and instructors in a collaborative process of teaching and learning (Yballe and O'Connor, 2000; Yballe and O'Connor, 2004; Moehle, 2005). In this paper, the process of using AI in business education as a tool to craft the ideal learning environment envisioned collectively by students and instructors is described. The results of this process are illustrated by conducting a repeated-measures assessment of perceived accomplishment and personal contribution to learning outcomes.

There have been several studies on the effect of AI principles on educational systems but these have focused on using AI to improve system-wide student academic success, (Torres and Weisenberger, 2001), administrative actions intended to create school communities that better serve students, (Bushman and Buster, 2002; Stetson and Miller, 2003; Henry, 2005) academic advising, (Bloom and Martin, 2002) curriculum and program review, (Stetson, 2005)

and school system sustainability and growth, (Adamson *et al.*, 2002). Beyond that cited above, little research has been conducted to examine the success of AI in the classroom as a tool for generating student-centered outcomes.

This research addresses students' contribution to their experience in classrooms, the co-created learning experience, and how students and teachers come together to serve a higher goal. This goal is one of achieving learning and knowledge in a shared and mutual environment. Senge (1990) refers to ''shared visions [that] emerge from personal visions'' (p. 211) in the creation of a perspective of the whole that is similar to a ''hologram'' (p. 212). The participants' collective image is one that has grown from their individual experiences and now reflects unity among the elements that comprise the whole. In the AI process described here, students are given an opportunity to co-determine what they want from a course and then, responsibility to create that.

An AI visioning process has been used in a number of courses including Organizational Behavior, Leadership Development, Management, and Organization Development. This exercise has yielded extensive and varied lists of desires and ultimate destinations that are unique to each cohort. Although the AI exercise is significantly different from the team-based learning approach used by Michaelsen *et al.* (2004), some of the outcomes are similar. Particularly, students experience high levels of cohesiveness, interaction, and attention to group process issues. They engage in student-driven and student-led activities, and they experience greater levels of involvement in the class. However, there remains one persistent question that begs further inquiry: did anything of any significance really happen over the course beyond the initial experience and exercise when desires were discovered and to which the students pledged their personal commitment? Did these desires manifest in the class, and if so, to what extent did students feel they contributed to their realization? The core question of this study is: Does AI have a measurable impact on student perceptions of achievement and their personal contribution to a shared vision in the business school classroom?

The premise of AI is that by envisioning the future using provocative descriptions in the affirmative as if they have already been achieved, that possible future becomes real for the participants. This question is addressed by focusing on the case of one particular class in which AI was used to identify a set of desires for an ''ideal learning situation'' and by developing an instrument to repeatedly assess the success of this co-creation effort throughout the semester. Although the outcomes generated will be different for every group envisioning a possible future, the learning experience can be enhanced through a systematic process of combining the appreciative methodology with an assessment tool.

## Conceptual overview

### Appreciative inquiry

AI is a process of organizational change and transformation grounded in social constructionist thought and dialog. Originally developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), this practice leverages the Pygmalion effect (Livingston, 1969) which says that individuals and groups perform up to the high expectations held by teachers, managers, or others in positions of authority. In essence, what we expect is what we usually experience. This effect has been demonstrated with parents and children, teachers and students, and managers with their subordinates. In AI's use in the classroom, these expectations are crafted and determined in students' shared dialog which is facilitated by the professor. While expectations of what is created are not dictated by the professor, there is no denying her presence in the system and her potential impact on the resulting aspirations of the students.

Organizations, or human systems, tend to develop in the direction of their foundational, shared images of what they collectively believe the future holds (Polak, 1973). Through this they socially construct (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) that image and in effect cause it to become reified in their experience. The Pygmalion effect can be applied in these systems through collaboratively crafting images of desired futures through generative dialog. From these rich and shared future images contained in the language of the participants, the group works in the present to determine and then engage in actions that will manifest that imagination. Analogizing them to living organisms, Cooperrider describes the ''heliotropic'' (1990) nature of human systems – their tendency to grow in a direction that is life affirming, rather than one that is depleting (Hart *et al.*, 2008). In organizations an intentional choice is made such that the entire system can transform. Focusing on a shared positive image begins the process of ''giving life''

to an organization. ''This image originates from the aggregate of the experiences shared among participants that capture peak moments, life giving experiences, and stories of personal and organizational excellence'' (Hart *et al.*, 2008:634). These retrospective experiences provide the matter from which imagined futures begin to emerge.

The use of AI in the classroom has received attention in the literature by Yballe and O'Connor (2000, 2004) and O'Connor and Yballe (2007) who engage the entire pedagogical effort from an appreciative stance. In-class activities, assignments, presentations, and team projects are all approached from an appreciative frame where students seek to discover what worked, what was fun, what they are most proud of. These topics of conversation span personal learning experiences and jobs, their experiences of excellence in their managers, and those of organizational excellence. This approach thereby inquires into multiple social domains including the personal, interpersonal, and organizational. Engaging the affirmative from multiple perspectives has the power to create layered support for the appreciative paradigm. Kayser (1990) outlines a similar approach in preparing, conducting, and managing meetings where he suggests that groups ''hold a session critique'' (p. 72). In this event, groups can evaluate both what they did in the meeting and in particular what they did well through a variety of means. In essence this represents ''discovery'' of a peak moment in their immediate experience and allows the group to leverage that in subsequent meetings. A working paper by Moehle (2005) has inquired into what is life giving about band class and what students perceive as having the greatest value, influence, and contribution to their personal education. The author hopes to glean insights about the positive reasons for joining and continuing in band and suggests that these points of knowledge may be valuable for educators, curriculum designers, and researchers in the field of music education.

## Student-centered learning

The AI exercise used in this study offers students the opportunity to increase their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) and responsibility to create lives and experiences that they find valuable and productive. Although it focuses on the learning environment, the lessons from this exercise extend beyond the classroom to a multitude of other domains in students' lives. It underscores the issue of freedom and the resulting responsibility that derives from creating that freedom. In the classroom, this freedom can be treated as an opportunity to focus on student-centered learning.

Student-centered learning offers students responsibility and activities that are driven by what attracts the students and what they are curious about. This approach takes the place of more traditional approaches to learning characterized by teacher and content-driven initiatives. Student-centered learning focuses more on what the students do and why they believe they are doing those things, and less on what the teacher does. This helps develop independence and motivation in students (Shuell, 1986; Biggs, 1990, 1999) and helps them see their contribution to the learning enterprise through planning, interacting, and assessing learning (Cannon, 2000).

Creating meaning for students is a challenge in many classes. Adopting a student-centered approach offers students the opportunity to focus on topics that are relevant to their needs, lives, and interests thereby connecting them to what is salient in their lived experience (McCombs and Whistler, 1997). When approached from this perspective, students become stakeholders in the learning process and the group is better able to utilize and serve the diverse interests and learning styles present in the classroom. As a result they experience themselves as competent problem-solvers (Aaronsohn, 1996) which leads to greater levels of confidence in their abilities and less attribution of successful outcomes to luck (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995).

A student-centered approach requires a change in teaching method. No longer can the class activities and focus be determined solely by the teacher. Teachers must consider student needs and interests first and be available to how those change across semesters. McCombs and Whistler (1997) found that when classes take this approach there is an increase in motivation, actual learning, and performance. Retention is also increased since students are processing the information through multiple avenues of apprehension including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic means and not just passively receiving information (Silberman, 1996). Possibilities for engaging students and understanding the course material include class discussions, encouraging students to visit during office hours, contextualizing the course information in students' lives, asking questions in writing or orally, changing the physical environment such as arranging the chairs in circles or U shapes, use of journaling, quotes, and

poetry in stimulating new insights, surveying students to determine what they are most interested in, what questions they have about the course, what they would like to know when they leave, and introducing other media such as music or art as aids in understanding and retention. A student-centered approach to the opening AI exercise initiates students into a participatory and collaborative process that leverages many of the concepts in this pedagogical orientation. It may be worth noting that the teacher's ability and willingness to share power with students through the AI exercise may create some discomfort for instructors who are more steeped in traditional approaches. This student-centered approach calls on teachers to release some of the control that often characterizes classrooms.

This exercise has been used with graduate and undergraduate classes and the subtle differences in facilitation are worth noting. The key difference between these groups seems to be in the amount of facilitation required on behalf of the teacher. Older, more experienced students seem to do better with the ambiguous nature of the questions. The exercise follows the 4D process (Mann, 2001; Ricketts and Willis, 2001) which is reflected in sets of questions that drive the dialog. The differing levels of facilitation for undergraduate and graduate populations are especially salient for the first two D's, Discovery and Dream as they are relatively independent conversations among peers. The 4D approach shepherds the in-class dialogs in ways that help students focus on the life-giving experiences they have had individually, and then on what is common across those experiences. Students then use those shared experiences to craft a meaningful future for this new learning environment. This model is further explained below and is reflected in Figure 1. Experience has made clear that the facilitator must remain aware of the small group processes that are unfolding and sensitive to groups who may be having trouble. There are some challenges with the ambiguous questions, which is a good point of development for students, however it is important not to let them flounder too long lest they fail and shrink from this exercise out of frustration. Sensitivity, perception, and good facilitation skills aid those who seem to have success with the exercise.

Another point that bears mentioning is the issue of inviting students into discovering peak learning experiences in their lives. Younger, less-experienced undergraduate and graduate students seem to have difficulty in unshackling themselves from the traditional academic arena in imagining these moments in their lives. Additional dialog with the class about many of the potential areas where they might have been on their learning edge (new courses obviously, new jobs, new relationships, the new social and academic structure that college offers and how it is dramatically different from high school, new living arrangements, new towns, etc. are some examples) prior to setting them free into the small group sessions helps them surmount this barrier as they tap into greatest learning moments in their young lives.

## Methodology

The study was conducted with 25 MBA students in a course titled ''Leadership and Managerial Skills'' at a small regional Midwestern university. The ages of class members ranged from 24 to 57 with a mean age of 29 years. There were 15 males and 10 females with one Chinese male and one South Asian female. All other students were white US citizens. Data were collected through the use of the AI exercise (explained below) and via student surveys at T1 (4 weeks after AI exercise), and T2 (12 weeks after the AI exercise).

## The in-class exercise

Before the class began the exercise the teacher provided an overview of AI and the process that the class was about to embark upon. The overview provided the background of AI and some of the fundamental principles upon which it is based. The slides summarizing the talking points are included in Appendix A.

Once the overview of AI was completed the in-class exercise began. The exercise followed the

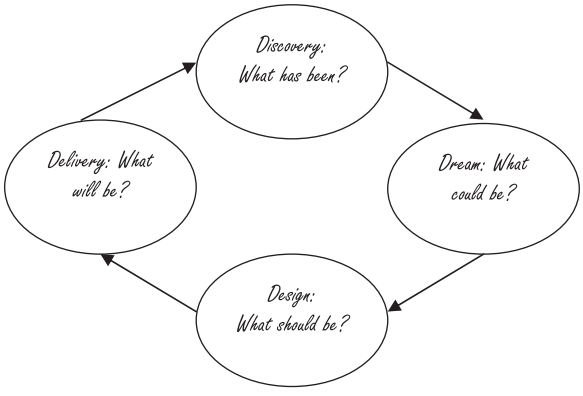


**Figure 1** Appreciative inquiry 4D cycle.

4D model (Mann, 2001; Ricketts and Willis, 2001) which was also reviewed during the overview.

This process began with Discovery of peak moments, moved to Dreaming about imagined possibilities, then to Design about these public and shared desires and finally to Delivery, or where the group would like to direct their efforts in creation of the ideal. This format provided structure for the dialog sessions that gently directed the participants through a step-by-step process. Before beginning the Discovery step students were asked to assemble in small groups of three or fewer. This level of intimacy ensured higher levels of contribution and less opportunity to ''socially loaf'' (Latane *et al.*, 1979). These groups remained intact for each step that required small group dialog thereby leveraging the emergent relationships that began to develop through the conversations. A brief review of these steps will follow.

*Discovery*. In this stage of the dialog participants inquired into peak learning experiences and how they might learn from those moments of greatness in their efforts to create future greatness. These ''moments'' could indeed be just that, a moment, or they might also be extended periods of time where students found themselves having to learn and make sense of their milieu over days, weeks or even months. The central notion is that they found the learning experience exciting and had to draw on their inner resources in a way that called them to new heights in their intellectual and behavioral repertoire. Questions that drove the Discovery step include:

1. What happened in that learning experience?
2. What did you do to make that happen?
3. What did others do to contribute to that experience?
4. How did that experience feel?

The questions acted as stimulants to thought and discussion that may have led to epiphanies that could inform action. At this early stage of the process students were asked to be prepared to report back to the plenary group. They were also told that this is not an assignment in the traditional sense where they were expected to come up with specific and ''right'' answers to the questions. By removing any pressure to ''perform'', they were liberated to truly ''discover'' their own best past. The questions were really aimed at discovering the themes and descriptors that may emerge in their shared experience. In some ways Discovery mirrors the act of ''presencing'' as described by Hendricks and Hendricks (1993) in their body centered work on body-mind awareness. Reconnecting to that which may have been glossed over or repressed through the psychological demands of life enables participants to revisit those peak experiences of learning that reside in their history.

The class reconvened after approximately 20 min and an open invitation was made to the group for reports, thereby reducing the performance anxiety students may experience when a teacher makes specific requests of particular students. During this process students' comments were captured on the blackboard in the actual words they used to describe their experience, thereby honoring their lived and shared experience. This process yielded rich and varied stories that reflected common themes across the small groups. Results of this step included:

- Being in a sink or swim situation;
- Responsibility for success and others;
- Presence of fear in the situation that served as motivator;
- Feeling encouraged;
- Feeling engaged with two-way support;
- The experience was a part of my being;
- I felt like I was going through a process without having any perceived notions of the outcome;
- I felt accepting … a sense of ''going with it'';
- The challenges were not easy … lots of hard questions;
- Personal – uncomfortable with the unknown … sticking with it;
- Creativity in the experience; and
- Happiness at the end of the event.

Once themes were captured on the board, a few minutes were spent to ensure that this was a complete summary of their experiences. An opportunity was made for anyone to add other items that failed to emerge in the small group conversations. After this step was completed the group moved into the Dream phase of the inquiry.

*Dream*. When this step was introduced students were invited to unleash their greatest hope for this class. They were encouraged to unshackle themselves from the tacit, internal editor of what is ''realistically'' possible and assured that there will be plenty of time to reign in their imaginations. For now, they were invited into the unknown future.

This step was facilitated through asking positive questions about what might be. Students reconvened in the same small groups from the

previous conversation and addressed the following questions:

1. What would have to happen for this to be a great learning experience?
2. What would you hope to learn?
3. Describe your experience if this were a great class.
4. What three wishes do you have that would make learning always like this?

Similar to the Discovery step, these questions were posed as conversation starters intended as provocative stimulants to thought and dialog. After approximately 15 min, students were asked to bring a report to the plenary session that focused on the most central issues that emerged for the group and that were thematic among them. Again the comments from the groups were captured on the board. Frequent interchange between the students and teacher assured that their ideas, thoughts and feelings were gathered accurately and that there was no abstraction applied through any tacit interpretive lens. After this session the board was covered with grand ideas about how the group might create a peak learning experience over the ensuing semester.

Once all groups had shared their Dreams there was a brief pause for reflection and an opportunity to affirm that space was made for all voices to be heard. Creations generated in this step include:

- A class that is engaging;
- Group discussion;
- Read specific case studies to discuss and learn about people problems in organizations;
- See the results of our learning in action;
- Build and manage cohesive teams and tight work groups;
- Personal learning issues stay in the class;
- Identify strengths and weaknesses in others in order to develop teams;
- Build self-confidence;
- Generate a deep understanding of who we are to increase and grow strengths;
- Gain positive feedback from assessments;
- Learn to establish goals and how to follow through on them;
- Bridge the gap of where we are now and where we want to be professionally and personally;
- Develop skills to apply in real life;
- To determine if we followed our career plan over the next 5–10 years. Was it helpful?
- Build communication and public speaking skills;
- Develop effective leadership styles;
- Break from the traditional method of teaching and learning;
- Have less lecture and more activities in class; and
- Learn to do in-box assessment better (one of numerous assessments that are completed prior to enrolling in the course).

*Design*. The Design stage took place in the plenary group where time was available for the group to discuss their thoughts and observations on what had occurred. Students were asked to ensure that they understood all that had been created by all groups and were told that this was the matter from which the Destiny step would be created. This represented their last chance to voice their hopes and dreams for the course. This also provided an opportunity for questions to be shared about what other groups contributed and new interpretations and meanings to be expressed in the interest of gathering a clearer understanding of what the class had generated.

The Design step slows the process to allow for reflection and the opportunity to draw connections among the identified issues that often yield other ideas similar to that of brainstorming. It provides one last opportunity to ''get on the ballot'' and ensures that all participants have had the opportunity to share those issues that they felt passionate about before moving on to the final step. Full representation and shared understanding is the goal of this step.

This step may be relatively brief. However, it does present an opportunity for the entire class to increase their cohesive and collaborative understanding of where they have been and collectively position themselves for a realization of where they want to go.

*Delivery*. The final step in the class exercise involved moving from the nominal list captured on the blackboard that reflected the desires of each small group to something that reflects the will of the class. At this point the boards were covered with ideas that were organized into the two large themes of Discovery and Dream. The Dream list is sometimes modified and added to during the Design step so that it better reflects the complete and shared understanding of the entire group. In this case there was no modification of the list of issues from the Dream stage. Students felt they had complete understanding of what other groups had created and there was no change and minimal dialog or

clarifying discussion during the Design phase of the inquiry. From this list the class moved into the Delivery step where participants individually identified those items from the Design list that each individual believed were central to creating a peak learning experience.

This step began with the instructor describing the idea of a gallery walk similar to a stroll through an art museum where they can review and reflect on the ''jewels'' that have been created. Once they had an opportunity to review those issues believed to contribute to peak learning they were asked to indicate which of the issues have the most relevancy for them individually. Students were given three votes in the form of check marks that they could cast next to the items on the board. They may cast all three for one particular issue or distribute them in any other manner they desire. At this point the floor was opened for them to move from an ''inside-out'' (Hunt, 1987) approach and at their own pace to review and then go to the board to make their mark. No particular process was used in the voting. By this time in the exercise there was a lively atmosphere in the room and students seemed to enjoy the freedom to approach the board when the spirit moved them. There is the possibility that some will wait to see how their peers vote and that may introduce some potential bias. This risk is tolerable to ensure that freedom which is a key theme of the exercise is maintained.

*Final Summary and Commitment*. After students cast their three votes and had taken their seats the group reviewed what had taken place. Votes coalesced around 10 of the 19 items on the board. A few moments were spent in recognition of these topics and again there was the awareness that there were themes among the group which had drawn the interests and desires of many. At this point, the creations of the process were collected and ordered in terms of priority based on which items received the greatest number of checks. These lists were distributed to students at the next class meeting. The following items received the number of votes in the parentheses and are presented in descending order of preference.

1. Develop skills to apply in real life (19);
2. Bridge the gap of where we are now and where we want to be professionally and personally (16);
3. Develop effective leadership styles (12);
4. Build and manage cohesive teams and tight work groups (10);
5. To determine if we followed our career plan over the next 5–10 years Was it helpful (7);
6. A class that is engaging (6);
7. Identify strengths and weaknesses in others in order to develop teams (2);
8. Build self-confidence (1);
9. Generate a deep understanding of who we are to increase and grow strengths (1);
10. Learn to establish goals and how to follow through on them (1);
11. Gain positive feedback from assessments;
12. Build communication and public speaking skills;
13. See the results of our learning in action;
14. Break from the traditional method of teaching and learning;
15. Have less lecture and more activities in class;
16. Read specific case studies to discuss and learn about people problems in organizations;
17. Group discussion;
18. Personal learning issues stay in the class; and
19. Learn to do in-box better.

There was one more conversation that had to take place before the exercise was finished. Students were asked to reconvene in their small groups to discuss what each of them would do to make the ideas contained in the Delivery stage a reality. How will each student take responsibility for realizing in their behavior what they claimed they desired for a peak learning experience over the semester? Examples of student commitments include:

1. Asking one good question in each class session;
2. Take chances with letting my true self be seen;
3. Withhold judgment of others' ideas and comments;
4. Create a safe learning environment by listening to others and talking less;
5. Speak in class;
6. Be prepared for group project meetings;
7. Come to class;
8. Read the material prior to class;
9. Try out what I am learning at work;
10. Consider the relevance of the course ideas in my home life; and
11. Take a more active part in class exercises than I usually do.

The essence of this step can be captured by the question ''who will do what by when?'' This level of commitment is necessary to actually create in practice that which was desired as a class. Students were told that reports were expected. Similar to the

other report sessions, students were allowed to discover their own comfort level about what and when to report. They were encouraged to make their claim public to their small group cohort on the premise that a public commitment at any level often receives greater attention and increases the likelihood of being enacted than one that is kept covert.

One caveat was offered in terms of what the group desired. While the instructor was available for whatever the group desired, it must be a win-win proposition. In other words, if the group determined through the AI process that they all deserve an ''A'' for the course, the instructor had the opportunity and responsibility to intervene saying that this is a fine aspiration as long as these grades are earned and not treated as an expectation or entitlement from the application of this process. Whatever is determined as the group's desires and ultimate destination must be agreed to by all and this includes the teacher, as she is an equal contributor and participant in the community of the class.

This step completes the exercise. Ideally it will be completed in one class session. However, it has been conducted successfully in more than one session depending on the frequency and duration of class meetings. In these instances it is important for the instructor to reconnect with where the group ended during the previous session to re-establish some of the momentum that is generated in the event. In total the exercise takes approximately 150 min.

### Instrumentation

A survey was developed that asked students to rate their experience of creating the future they envisioned. Statements were created from each of their co-created desired characteristics of a peak learning experience. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement. For instance, they were asked to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale, their level of agreement with statements such as: ''We are developing skills to apply in real life'' or ''I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally'' on a scale of 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree. These statements were presented in the questionnaire in descending order of preference as determined by them in the opening AI exercise. Students were also asked to rate their individual contribution to achieving this experience as a corollary question that accompanied each statement. This survey was administered on two occasions over the semester. The first assessment (T1) was given 4 weeks after the in-class exercise and the second (T2) was administered 2 months later. The full survey is contained in Appendix B. The results from the survey and differences between student perceptions as the semester unfolded are presented below.

## Results and discussion

Data analysis consisted of examining the mean scores for each item and comparing the results for achievement and personal contribution at time 1 (4 weeks after the AI exercise) and time 2 (12 weeks after). Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare the means for the achievement questions and personal contribution questions comparing time 1 and time 2 results.

### Perceived achievement

Table 1 below indicates the level of perceived achievement for the statements generated by the students in the AI process. The item that received the most importance, ''develop skills to apply in real life'' was rated 4.37 on the degree to which it had been achieved after 4 weeks into the course. The item receiving the highest rating, ''this class is engaging'' (mean=4.74) was not in fact an item assigned a very high level of importance during the AI process. Those items receiving votes of importance during the AI process (items 1–10) were all given positive ratings (above 3.5) at time 1.

At time 2 only four items' rating changed significantly. Students rated item 2, ''I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally'' significantly higher at time 2 ($m$=4.26, SD=0.562) than at time 1 ($m$=3.74, SD=0.653). One item considered important during the AI process ''this class is engaging'' was significantly lower at time 2 ($m$=4.37, SD=0.597) than at time 1($m$=4.74, SD=0.452) with significant value of $P$=0.031. The other two significantly different items also had to do with perceptions about the course, ''I believe we have broken away from traditional methods of teaching and learning'' and ''have less lecture and more activities in class'' and students gave them significantly lower ratings in perceived achievement. Both of these items, however, were among the items receiving no votes when their importance was assessed in the AI process.

**Table 1** Perceived achievement of key outcomes: Paired-sample comparison between middle (T1) and late (T2) in the semester

| | *T1 mean* | *SD* | *T2 mean* | *SD* | *t-value* | *Sig. (2-tailed)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. We are developing skills to apply in real life | 4.37 | 0.495 | 4.53 | 0.611 | 1.00 | |
| 2. I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally | 3.74 | 0.653 | 4.26 | 0.562 | 2.73 | 0.014* |
| 3. I am developing an effective leadership style | 3.79 | 0.630 | 3.95 | 0.705 | 0.72 | |
| 4. I am learning how to build and manage cohesive teams and tight work groups | 4.16 | 0.602 | 3.95 | 0.621 | −1.00 | |
| 5. I believe the class is helping me develop a career plan that will be helpful over the next 5–10 years | 3.89 | 0.809 | 4.00 | 0.816 | 0.40 | |
| 6. This class is engaging | 4.74 | 0.452 | 4.37 | 0.597 | 0.72 | 0.031* |
| 7. I am learning how to identify strengths and weaknesses in others to develop teams | 3.79 | 0.855 | 4.05 | 0.621 | 0.89 | |
| 8. I am building self-confidence | 4.05 | 0.779 | 4.10 | 0.737 | 0.20 | |
| 9. I am generating a deep understanding of who I am to increase and grow my strengths | 4.26 | 0.805 | 4.16 | 0.688 | −0.44 | |
| 10. I am learning how to establish goals and how to follow through on them | 3.52 | 0.964 | 3.76 | 0.714 | 1.03 | |
| 11. I have gained positive feedback from assessments | 3.63 | 1.01 | 4.26 | 0.805 | 1.99 | |
| 12. I am building communication and public speaking skills | 3.95 | 0.705 | 3.89 | 0.809 | −0.24 | |
| 13. I am beginning to see the results of our learning in action | 3.68 | 0.671 | 3.89 | 0.734 | 1.17 | |
| 14. I believe we have broken away from the traditional method of teaching and learning | 4.52 | 0.611 | 4.00 | 1.05 | −1.82 | 0.086** |
| 15. We have less lecture and more activities in class | 4.37 | 0.597 | 3.63 | 1.07 | −2.42 | 0.026* |
| 16. We are reading specific case studies to discuss and learn about people problems in organizations | 2.55[a] | 0.921 | 2.94 | 0.998 | 1.38 | |
| 17. We are having meaningful group discussion | 4.29 | 0.608 | 4.23 | 0.948 | −0.26 | |
| 18. Our learning stays in the class | 3.25[b] | 1.29 | 3.69 | 0.946 | 1.52 | |
| 19. We are learning to do the in-box better | 2.59[c] | 0.87 | 2.18 | 1.33 | −1.38 | |

*$P<0.05$ **$P<0.10$
[a]$n=18$.
[b]$n=16$.
[c]$n=17$.
$n=19$.

## Perceived personal contribution

Student assessment on the level of their personal contribution to achieving each item ranged from a high of 4.26, ''I am learning how to establish goals and follow through on them'' to a low of 2.19 on ''learning to do in-box better.'' Table 2 summarizes these results. In comparing the perceived personal contribution later in the semester to early semester ratings, students felt they made significant gains in their personal contribution on the top three items of importance: ''we are developing skills to apply in real life'' (T2*:* $m=3.89$, SD=0.611), ''I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally'' (T2: $m=4.13$, SD=0.692) and ''I am developing an effective leadership style'' (T2: $m=4.05$, SD=0.691). Only one item of importance, ''I am learning how to establish goals and how to follow through on them,'' decreased significantly from early in the semester to late semester in the students' perceptions of personal contribution (T2: $m=3.68$, SD=0.749).

The results lend support to the conclusion that AI has a positive effect on the student experience. Students articulated their desired course outcomes in terms of provocative, affirmative statements in the present tense – as if these outcomes had already been achieved. The study results indicate that early and late in the semester, the students believed they were achieving the articulated future. The finding that there were no significant differences in perceived achievement at time 2 from their very positive ratings at time 1 confirms the usefulness of AI as a tool to move the participants in the direction of the questions that are asked, and to create a lived experience consistent with the positive image they construct (Cooperrider, 1990). Personal contribution to the outcome increased for

**Table 2** Perceived personal contribution to key outcomes paired-sample comparison at middle (T1) and late (T2) in the semester

| | *T1 mean* | *SD* | *T2 mean* | *SD* | *t-value* | *Sig. (two-tailed)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. We are developing skills to apply in real life | 3.37 | 0.495 | 3.89 | 0.620 | 2.38 | 0.029* |
| 2. I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally | 3.58 | 0.737 | 4.13 | 0.692 | 3.16 | 0.005* |
| 3. I am developing an effective leadership style | 3.53 | 0.841 | 4.05 | 0.621 | 2.04 | 0.056** |
| 4. I am learning how to build and manage cohesive teams and tight work groups | 3.74 | 0.806 | 3.87 | 0.574 | 0.545 | |
| 5. I believe the class is helping me develop a career plan that will be helpful over the next 5–10 years | 3.63 | 0.597 | 3.97 | 0.676 | 1.63 | |
| 6. This class is engaging | 3.78[a] | 0.878 | 3.78 | 0.808 | 0.000 | |
| 7. I am learning how to identify strengths and weaknesses in others to develop teams | 3.63 | 0.831 | 3.74 | 0.562 | 0.399 | |
| 8. I am building self-confidence | 4.05 | 0.780 | 4.10 | 0.658 | 0.203 | |
| 9. I am generating a deep understanding of who I am to increase and grow my strengths | 3.83[a] | 0.857 | 4.11 | 0.676 | 0.960 | |
| 10. I am learning how to establish goals and how to follow through on them | 4.26 | 0.806 | 3.68 | 0.749 | −2.16 | 0.045* |
| 11. I have gained positive feedback from assessments | 4.11 | 0.875 | 4.00 | 0.882 | 0.369 | |
| 12. I am building communication and public speaking skills | 3.74 | 0.733 | 3.63 | 0.684 | 0.383 | |
| 13. I am beginning to see the results of our learning in action | 3.74 | 0.933 | 3.79 | 0.631 | 0.252 | |
| 14. I believe we have broken away from the traditional method of teaching and learning | 3.89 | 1.05 | 3.79 | 1.08 | −0.282 | |
| 15. We have less lecture and more activities in class | 3.89[a] | 0.963 | 3.50 | 0.786 | −1.16 | |
| 16. We are reading specific case studies to discuss and learn about people problems in organizations | 2.33[a] | 1.03 | 3.00 | 1.14 | 1.72 | |
| 17. We are having meaningful group discussion | 3.97 | 0.754 | 3.82 | 0.901 | −0.516 | |
| 18. Our learning stays in the class | 3.38[b] | 0.885 | 3.50 | 0.894 | 0.344 | |
| 19. We are learning to do the in-box exercise better | 2.19[c] | 0.981 | 1.95 | 1.16 | −1.096 | |

*$P<0.05$ **$P<0.10$
[a]$n=18$.
[b]$n=16$.
[c]$n=17$.
$n=19$.

the most critical outcomes envisioned by the students.

It is interesting to note that the items for which achievement seemed to go down from time 1 to time 2 are focused not on individual student learning goals but rather on their experience of the classroom, the instructor, or the course as, a whole. One can only speculate on explanations for these changes in perception. One possible explanation would suggest that the novelty of the new methods of learning ''wore off'' that is, the students initially felt the approaches they used such as AI were unique and different from what they had come to expect, but over time, as they experienced the class, they became practiced in these approaches. The proportion of traditional methods used by the instructor (as compared to novel methods) might have increased over time. Course fatigue, competing demands from other classes, work, life, and intra-group challenges may have also contributed to a change in student reactions to the course. Still, it is important to note that the item ''this class is engaging'' received a high rating of 4.7 at time 1 and only dropped to 4.37 at time 2, holding its status as an item with which students agreed or strongly agreed.

## Relevance of AI

What can be said about AI from the results here? AI has the potential to direct participants in terms of their actions, help them stay focused on the most important topics, and improve their personal contribution to making those goals a reality. By using the language of AI the instructor was able to create a sustained level of achievement in the areas that matter most according to students' self-proclaimed interests and commitments. This has positive potential for creating learning environments that serve the highest interests and motivations of students. It supports the ideas

contained in the student-centered learning research where students experience greater levels of independence and motivation (Shuell, 1986; Biggs, 1990; 1999) and helps focus the course on how the concepts make sense in their lives (McCombs and Whistler, 1997). It could also be argued that this form of learning helps build confidence and provides a feedback process that helps students understand their personal contribution to their experience and their success (Aaronsohn, 1996; Cannon, 2000; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1995).

These ideas manifested themselves in the course through frequent reference back to the exercise which aided in making the ideas of AI a more permanent part of the students. They began to adopt an appreciative mindset in reference to course material and more importantly, according to anecdotal reports, in their personal and professional lives. In some classes, students have occasionally become so enamored with AI that they orient their papers or presentations around the topic. This further cements these ideas into their consciousness and daily practice. These independent choices reflect some of what Aaronsohn referred to when he talked about building confidence and helping ''students understand their personal contribution to their experience and their success.'' Their self-driven choices in these projects reflected Hunt's (1987) notion of operating from an ''inside-out'' perspective that affirms their experience.

An AI approach to the course underscores the uniqueness of the methodology. In this context, the use of this organizational development process is not about change. As this particular social structure has not existed in any space prior to the present semester, there is no previous history of norms of behavior that must be assimilated by new members. The group is unencumbered by any shared and constricting past that may prohibit enacting new behaviors even though they may be socialized and habituated individually regarding what it means to be a student from their extensive individual experiences. In this setting, they have the opportunity to start a new conversation and be creative in their choice of outcomes through their use of language. This is the power of AI in its opportunity to craft conversations that have less to do with change and more to do with creating the reality desired. Change has much to do with eliminating what is undesirable. In the AI paradigm, the main focus is generative (Bushe, 2007) and emphasizes the creation of what is desired with little energy spent on changing or solving existing problems. The belief is that focusing on what one wants will supplant the deficiencies. In this milieu, the only deficiencies present are those introduced to the class by the ghosts of their collective experience.

The delivery of the exercise is mostly a facilitation process for the teacher with a little teaching thrown in at the beginning with the AI lecturette. Because of this, every teacher will bring her own personal style and interpretation of AI to the process. Various aspects of the 4D cycle may be emphasized more heavily due to the teacher's style or sensitivity to the issues that seem to have captured the imagination of the class. Owing to the evolving nature of the process it is necessary to maintain one's sensitivity and perceptivity to the class environment and yield to the ''energy'' in the room. Because of this the flow of the exercise may shift.

Over time there is the possibility that students may have this experience across numerous courses with different instructors. Given that possibility one could imagine that they might benefit from experiencing multiple interpretations of the process. The beauty of this is that participants will begin to understand that AI is not a recipe-driven practice, but instead is available to various interpretive lenses that are bound only by the creativity of the facilitator and the group.

## Conclusions and implications

Because the study reports the results of one class scenario using AI to generate learning ideals and measuring success on a unique set of learning outcomes, this particular instrument cannot be used with any other group. However, it would be beneficial to conduct the overall process described here with other business/management classrooms. Generating multiple lists of outcomes and conducting repeated measures assessments with a variety of classroom groups will begin to validate a process by which AI can be used and evaluated for building a sense of self-direction and self-efficacy in management education.

As the process continues to emerge in each successive course new possibilities for applying this approach to creating communities truly committed to creating peak learning experiences may evolve. Ideally, these experiences will be ones that students will reflect on with satisfaction for having taken the challenge of ownership and responsibility.

Of particular interest are those peak learning experiences, that is, the items identified during the AI visioning process, that result in an *increase* in the students' personal influence over time *vs* those that leave the students' feeling relatively ineffective or powerless. Hopefully, these will be experiences during which students actually learned in ways that make the material a permanent part of their personal competencies and available repertoire for action in business and management settings long after the course has ended.

A review of the results above clearly reflects opportunities for further development for the instructor and what role she takes in making this a more effective and sustainable experience. The reaction to items outside the control of the student such as the ebb and flow of lecture/discussion *vs* experiential or case study exercises, the rigorous demands of reading and writing assignments, and personal differences in instructional style and instructor personality may play a significant role in impacting student perceptions. Applying the AI approach combined with more research examining the role of instructor in impacting student outcomes is warranted.

Instructing students on how to employ AI in a small social system (the classroom) may have implications for how they approach organization development and change in their career experiences. Although the authors are interested in students taking the content of the course to their business and management settings, they are also interested in how students' participation in an AI process in the classroom influences their view of change in other organizations. How might it cause a student to ask a question in the field such as: ''what is working here and what is my role in making that happen?'' Finally, exploring the difference between a classroom setting in which AI is employed for co-creating learning and a setting where traditional learning goals are prescribed by the instructor would prove useful in further assessing the power of possibility in business education.

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## Appendix A

See Table A1.

**Table A1** Talking points of AI foundations

| | |
|---|---|
| Appreciative inquiry | • Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. They are heliotropic. (self-fulfilling prophecy)<br>• The seeds of change are contained in the questions we ask.<br>• Organizations are not problems to be solved, but mysteries to be embraced. They need constant re-affirmation. |
| AI essential conditions | • Get the whole system in the room.<br>• Focus on the life-giving past to envision and ignite possibilities of preferred futures.<br>• This is not problem solving. It is an exercise in anticipatory learning – the social construction of a preferred future. |
| AI four key questions | • High point, peak learning experience<br>• What was valued most in that experience?<br>  ○ about self.<br>  ○ nature of work.<br>  ○ others.<br>  ○ the organization/school/classroom.<br>• What are the core factors that give life to that instance?<br>• Images of future possibility: Three wishes that would make learning always like this? |
| AI leverage points | • Participatory process, *vs* dictated from top management<br>• Competitive advantage is people |
| AI four main steps in application | • Discovery – Best of what has been<br>• Dream – Best that might be<br>• Design/dialog – What it might truly look like?<br>• Delivery/destination – What will we commit to? |

## Appendix B

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. We are developing skills to apply in real life. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 2. I feel I am bridging the gap of where I am now and where I want to be professionally and personally. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 3. I am developing an effective leadership style. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 4. I am learning how to build and manage cohesive teams and tight work groups. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 5. I believe the class is helping me to develop a career plan that will be helpful over the next 5–10 years. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 6. This class is engaging. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 7. I am learning how to identify strengths and weaknesses in others to develop teams. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 8. I am building self-confidence. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

**Appendix B** *Continued*

9. I am generating a deep understanding of who I am to increase and grow my strengths.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

10. I am learning how to establish goals and how follow through on them.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

11. I have gained positive feedback from assessments.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

12. I am build communication and public speaking skills.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

13. I am beginning to see the results of our learning in action.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

14. I believe we have broken away from the traditional method of teaching and learning.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

15. Have less lecture and more activities in class.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

16. We are reading specific case studies to discuss and learn about people problems in organizations.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| SD | D | N | A | SA |

My contribution to achieving this is:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

**Appendix B** *Continued*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17. We are having meaningful group discussion. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 18. Learning stays in the class. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |
| 19. Learn to do in-box exercise better. | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| SD | D | N | A | SA |
| My contribution to achieving this is: | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very little | Some | Average | A lot | A great deal |

As a means of assessing our progress in achieving that which we declared as desirable for a peak learning experience, please rate your experience on the following issues. In the second rating, please indicate your honest assessment of your contribution to achieve that particular goal.
1=Strongly disagree.
2=Disagree.
3=Neutral.
4=Agree.
5=Strongly agree.

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