Delta College

Appreciative Inquiry (Ai) in the Classroom

Success Story Submitted by:

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Background of the College

Delta College, in University Center, Michigan, serves Saginaw, Midland and Bay counties in east central Michigan. The College opened in 1961 and currently serves approximately 11,000 academic and skilled trades students. It is a charter member of the National League for Innovation in the Community College; Jean Goodnow is the president.

Introduction to AI

Leslie Prast and Connie Watson became trained as AI Facilitators in June 2004. Prast was a professor of English and director of the center for organizational success at Delta College before her retirement in 2007. Watson was an instructor of psychology at Delta. After learning how to facilitate AI, they decided to team up and find ways of using it in the classroom to enhance teaching and learning. Here are several stories about their successes.

Leslie Prast's Story

"I know that the retention rate for students was higher in all the courses I used AI in, compared with previous classes."

In Fall 2004 and beyond, Leslie Prast used AI on the first day of class to begin each of her developmental and advanced college composition courses. To make the process more inclusive, she did not distribute a course syllabus at the beginning of the course as she normally would; instead, she asked the students to partner with her in creating a 'great class' together. That was the positive topic of Inquiry. The students seemed skeptical at first, but all were willing to go along and try out a new approach.

According to Prast, the paired interviews and small group dialogue in the AI cycle were fun for students, especially focusing on positive experiences of past great classes. To her surprise, only one student - out of about 150 total - said that he had never had a great class. When Prast asked if he had ever played sports in high school, he said yes, he had enjoyed success as a football player. She then asked him to remember a positive time in his football career when he had

enjoyed a team learning or coaching experience, and he found that he was easily able to relate a story from his experience as an athlete.

Prast said she was always excited to see the small-group Dream Statements and Strategies the students created to make the class great for all of them. They frequently described Strategies that Prast usually included in her syllabus: attend regularly and on time; come with the assignment prepared; ask questions; be open to new ideas, etc. However, creating the Strategies themselves from their own best experiences of past great classes, gave students the confidence to know that they could create a great class together and also inspired them to take the actions they developed because they owned them. In all classes, the most successful Strategy students recalled was collaborating on group projects and assignments, an easy one for Prast to facilitate.

All the students took AI seriously; none developed Strategies for having "no homework" or "canceling class." However, Prast found that good communication was necessary to maintain a partnership relationship between the students and the teacher. For example, the students would sometimes try to put the responsibility on Prast for making sure their Dream Statements were realized. In those cases, she would throw the ball back into their court and ask them how "we" were going to work together to implement the Strategies and realize the Dream Statements.

In one instance, one class identified the Strategy of "reasonable work load" for Prast to implement. Her response was to ask them what "reasonable" meant and how she would know whether the work she was assigning was "reasonable" for them or not. As a result, they had a good discussion about the importance of good communication between students and instructor. They all promised to collaborate in setting and keeping assignment deadlines while still achieving content and skills' student learning outcomes. In the end, they all agreed to add the phrase "communicate needs" to the "reasonable work load" Strategy.

Another example of partnering was the Strategy, "Learn everyone's name," which was suggested in several classes. Again, Prast asked the students to devise a way for students to learn each other's names. One student suggested a method that someone had used in a previous course; Prast said, "It was fun and worked very well." They then were able to call everyone by their first names, contributing to the sense of community and cooperation in the class.

Check In at Midterm

Around midterm each semester in each course, Prast asked students how they were doing in terms of implementing the Strategies for achieving their Dream Statements. While almost all of the feedback was positive, she also received information that allowed her to address a classroom "problem" from a positive frame. She had been wondering how to deal with a well-meaning student who was dominating class discussions by calling out answers and generally acting as the class spokesperson. At the midterm check in, when she asked students, "What should be changed?", they said: "Be respectful," "Pay attention during presentations," and "Wait your turn to speak." Interestingly, the talkative student countered by suggesting that his classmates do more to "contribute to the MAX," as he felt that he was doing all the work. The discussion created an opportunity to focus on how each student could take responsibility for contributing to class discussions, since some readily admitted that they were only too happy to sit back and let their talkative classmate make all the effort.

In another class, when Prast asked the class at midterm, "Is this a great class yet?", two of the three student groups responded, "Yes!" while the third group said, "It is an OK, no big deal class (we are not all tight yet)." This intriguing answer led Prast to ask more questions about what this group meant. It turned out that the classroom-seating configuration was a problem for this particular group; seated at long tables in rows facing the teacher at the front of the classroom, they were unable to see their classmates during class. This was news to Prast, since the seating worked well from her perspective; she was able to see all the students while having them see both her and the whiteboard behind her. As a result of the discussion, they decided to rearrange the tables into a "U" shape around the outside of the room, so that the students could see each other, as well as Prast and the board. This group decision changed the whole dynamic of the class, making for a friendlier environment, helping the students feel more comfortable with each other, and demonstrating the teacher's willingness to collaborate with them and to respect their ideas and opinions about their preferred learning environment.

Improved Retention and Final Grades

Prast said, "I know that the retention rate for students was higher in all the courses I used AI in, compared with previous classes" (Prast, 2007). From Fall 2003 to Winter 2004, prior to using AI, the average of the retention rate for all of Prast's classes and sections was 87.8 percent; after

using AI, the average of the retention rate was 89.8 percent - an improvement of 2 percentage points overall. Prast believes that retention was improved because students looked out for each other, formed friendships, and contributed to each other's successful learning. For instance, when a student was absent, at least one classmate would call or email to give a review of what was covered in class and what was assigned for the next class meeting. This was possible because they had decided to exchange telephone numbers and email addresses for this purpose.

Final grades improved as well. For Fall 2003 and Winter 2004, the average of the final grades for English 90, Developmental English–Introduction to College Reading and Writing - was 75.8 percent, before Prast began using AI. For Fall 2004 and Winter 2005, after beginning to use AI, the average of the final grades was 79.8 percent - an improvement of 4 percentage points. For Fall 2003 and Winter 2004, the average final grades for English 112, College Composition II, was 79.9 percent and, after using AI, 83.1 percent - an improvement of 3.2 percentage points (Prast, 2007).

By their own admission, students looked forward to coming to class and working together instead of competing with each other, and Prast was happy to adopt a less authoritarian role. By allowing the students to create their own 'great class,' based on the best of their past experiences, she was able to produce a course syllabus that reflected student ideas based on their individual and group past successes.

Another example of student empowerment engendered by AI was the initiative that students took in reminding each other of a particular Strategy, e.g., "Be respectful" or "Be open-minded with a positive attitude toward others' ideas" if or when someone made a put-down comment about another classmate's contribution, question or answer.

More Rewarding for the Teacher

Prast said that using AI in her classes made teaching more rewarding and enjoyable for her by enlisting the collaboration and positive energy of her students to envision, design and implement great classes together.

Connie Watson and Leslie Prast's Story

Beginning in Fall 2004, Connie Watson and Leslie Prast implemented AI at the beginning of their own classes each semester to help students create 'great classes.' In addition, they also introduced ways of using AI in the classroom to full and part-time faculty at Delta at the start of each semester so that they might also use AI to collaboratively create great classes.

To help faculty easily get on board with AI, Watson and Prast developed several handouts. They also developed questions for use at midterm to get feedback from students on how the course was working out. See Appendices at the end of this story for easily reproduced handouts.

According to Watson and Prast, more and more faculty are using AI at the start of their classes, and expressing interest in AI. They learned that faculty and students, in developmental to advanced courses across disciplines, shared the desire for a rewarding class and they eagerly committed to AI as a means of creating and achieving their shared Dreams.

Prast's Composition II English Class

Here are some examples of Dream Statements created by students in Prast's Composition II English class in Fall 2004:

We are interacting with others on interesting topics in a relaxed atmosphere while applying it to life!

In this class we work hard towards achieving a successful life.

In this class, we work together to make it a relaxed atmosphere so that the class is interesting and it applies to our lives.

In ENG 112 we are relaxed and interested while applying what we learn to life as well as applying ourselves.

We work and learn interactively in a relaxed atmosphere from a great teacher with interesting topics that apply to life!

Here are some examples of Strategies that students developed in order to actualize their Dream Statements:

Attitude: dedication/devotion to achieving goals

Open to others' ideas

Communicate likes and hobbies

Creative teaching: variety of activities, students teach each other

Work together on group projects

Strong work ethic/organization

Controversial topics to promote different views

Take responsibility for learning/getting the most out of the class

Conference with the teacher

Regular attendance

Reasonable work load (communicate needs)

Make connections to our own lives

Learn everyone's name

Midterm Check In

At midterm, Prast asked students two questions: What is working well for us? And what should be changed, i.e., what do we want more of?

What is working well for us?

Interaction between classmates

Have incorporated many of our strategies while working on our group research projects

Assignments on board at end of every class

Everyone involved

Pace of class

Good work load and positive atmosphere

What should be changed? (What do we want more of?)

Group work?

Breakfast buffet with omelet chef!

Less dream statement work

More group projects with different people to get to know others better

Nothing

Is this a great class yet? Why or why not?

We are on our way.

Yes, everyone seems to know each other and we are meeting our strategies.

Yes, we are reaching our goals.

Yes, it is very interactive.

Yes. We are on track with our goals and we're having a great time here!

Here's what Tanya, a student in Prast's English class, had to say:

I believe the (Dream) statement had an impact on us to succeed by coming together as a group, by stating what type of class we all liked to have, and it gave us an incentive to work and do well in the class . . . I believe this activity was a useful resource to any class and I would recommend that more teachers use this concept.

Connie Watson's Psychology Class

Here are some examples of Dream Statements from Watson's psychology class, Fall 2006:

Having hands on experience is a life full of commitment.

We strive everyday to stay committed to our goals and classmates by creating a fun, hands on environment that is applied to our everyday lives.

We are committed to using hands-on class experience with psychology and applying it to our daily lives.

We are committed to a hands-on learning experience that we can apply to real life.

Here are some examples of Strategies developed by the students:

Be on time to achieve our commitment

Keep up with current issues

Do the things that are asked of you

Good classroom discussions on what we have learned

Be open with hands on ideas

Relate assignments to your life

We will all have positive attitudes to promote a healthy learning environment for everyone

Not skipping class (i.e., attending class)

Paying attention

Staying involved in group activities/questions

Bringing life experiences inside the classroom

Appendix A

Process for Using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in the Classroom

In the first class meeting, invite students to partner with you in collaboratively creating a "great class" this term. The time for each activity can be designed to fit the length of the class; for one-hour classes, you might need to take two half sessions or assign some of the activities as an out-of-class activity. For instance, once students have chosen partners for the paired interviews, the interviews themselves could take place outside of class.

Explain briefly the Five Generic Processes of AI as a preview of the activity; you can project these on an overhead:

Five Generic Processes of Appreciative Inquiry

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry
2. Inquire into exceptionally positive moments
3. Share the stories and identify life-giving forces
4. Create shared images of a preferred future
5. Innovate and improvise ways to create that future

Ask the students to pair up with someone they don't know or don't know well. (If there is an uneven number, you can pair up with one of the students; this is more effective than having a trio). Tell them that they will be interviewing each other, using an Interview Guide that will help them share their stories about their best great-class experiences.

Allow time for the interviews. Then ask them to turn over the Interview Guide, reflect on what they have heard from their partner, and fill out the Summary Sheet.

Ask pairs to pair up with one or two other pairs - students they don't know or don't know well - either four or six students per group, depending on the number of students in the class. Have each student share their partner's best stories, then brainstorm the themes they heard in the stories that created a "great class" in the past or present. Have each group discuss and choose the three to five themes they heard and record them on a piece of poster paper and hang or post it on

the wall. Then someone from each group can present their themes to the class and ask if there are any questions about the meaning of the themes.

Hand out three colored sticky dots to each student and ask them to place sticky dots on the three themes that they personally think are essential to creating a "great class." Assure them that they are not voting; they are only graphically displaying the energy of the entire class.

Ask each small group to select one essential theme (with sub-themes if desired) that they all agree on (again, not voting; agreeing through dialogue) and create a Dream statement that synthesizes the themes or, through dialogue, generates new ones. The Dream Statement is positive and expressed in present tense, and can be more than one sentence. Have each group write their Dream Statement on poster paper and hang it up or post it to present to the class.

If there's time, ask for one person from each of the small groups to come together and synthesize the various Dream Statements into one statement for the whole class; other students might take a short break. Or, keep the individual groups' Dream Statements, without synthesizing them. In either case, ask the students (still in small groups) to propose Strategies for making their Dream Statements become a reality. Have them record the Strategies under the Dream Statements and report them out to the whole class.

Who is Responsible?

Ask the students, who is responsible for making all this happen? They usually will answer, "We are." For example: "Learn everyone's name" was one Strategy. Ask the students for ideas on how to accomplish that. Show the students that they are partners with you in making this a "great class."

Input the Dream Statement(s) and Strategies into a word document, print a copy for each student, then hand them back to the students with the class syllabus at the next class meeting.

Midterm Check In

Around midterm, revisit the Dream Statements and Strategies. Put the students back into their original groups and ask them the following questions:

What is working well for us?

What do we need to change? What do we want MORE of?

Is this a great class yet? Why or why not?

Share and discuss the answers as a whole group. Discuss and agree on any desired changes.

Appendix B

Example of an Interview Guide for Creating a Great Class

1. BEST EXPERIENCE

A. Tell me about the most challenging and exciting class you ever had. What was it? What made it challenging and exciting? What did the teacher do? What did you do? What did other students do?

B. How do you learn best? Tell me about a time when you learned something very challenging. What contributed to your learning?

C. Tell me about a class in which you learned a lot. What was the situation? Who else was involved and what did they do? What did you do to foster your own learning? What made this a highpoint learning experience for you?

2. VALUES:

A. Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – as a person and as a learner?

B. When you are feeling best about learning, what about the act of learning do you value?

C. What do you value most about being a successful learner?

D. What is the single most important thing that contributes to your successful learning?

3. THREE WISHES: What three wishes do you have for this course?

Appendix C

Example of a Summary Sheet

1. BEST EXPERIENCES

What were the high-point stories that your partner shared with you about great classes and/or teaching and learning?

2. VALUES

What were the high-point values that your partner shared with you about great classes and/or teaching and learning?

3. THREE WISHES:

What were your partner's three wishes for this course?