expert insights

Appreciative Inquiry Questions – Content is not Enough

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Your recent book chapter, titled Asking Better Questions, emphasizes the importance of broadening inquiry in learning design. To help readers understand the impact of moving to a broader inquiry, could you share an example comparison of the results people can get when they shift from a narrow inquiry to a broadened inquiry.

In a classic sense, the role of an instructional designer is to develop learning solutions. The purpose can vary, such as to close skill gaps or build knowledge and the work begins with analysis to identify essential needs. Spending less time probing instructional needs and more time in content development may result in a learning solution that fails to deliver on its purpose.

A potential antidote is to broaden inquiry to better understand the instructional needs from the groups who will use the instructional product. Combining the Socratic inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry methods give instructional designers a pathway to be more inclusive in their approach, especially with emotionally charged topics. The result can deliver on its purpose more securely, be more durable or useful, and spark ideas for broader application.

Consider this. A young adult approaches their parent to declare they feel their gender identity does not conform to the sex assigned at birth. An instructional designer is involved in a larger team effort to educate parents on ways to manage such a declaration. A typical approach to building awareness or knowledge may be to consult psychology sources or advocacy groups. Alternately, the instructional designer may compose Socratic inquiry items that open pathways to learning such as:

"What do you already know about gender identity, gender dysphoria, or sexual identity?"

"How does such a declaration affect the members of your immediate family and community?"

Appreciative Inquiry items may include:

"What feelings surfaced when you heard this declaration (from your child, community member)?"

"What do you believe led to this declaration?"

"How might your family/community respond or treat this young adult?"

"What do you feel you need to know to better understand what happened and what options there may be for moving forward?"

What inspired you to explore the intersection of Outdoor-Based

Experiential Training (OBET) programs and women's leadership development as the focus of your dissertation?

The inspiration originated with observations I made as a facilitator of an OBET program for business professionals. I wanted to investigate how women developed their leadership skills in a setting stripped of most modern conveniences and in the company of men. I also wanted to uncover what instructional designs and facilitation methods aided or detracted from the overall learning experiences of the women participants.

Could you share an overview of the most surprising or unexpected findings from your research?

The most surprising finding was that the women did not feel pressured to compete with the men in this environment. They reported feelings of appreciation for their partnership.

Considering the implications of your dissertation findings for instructional designers and facilitators, what are some practical steps they can take to incorporate gender sensitivity and

inclusivity into training program design and facilitation?

Steps I have taken include staying current on fundamentals of human communication and cultural responsiveness. This has helped instructional components such as word choice, phrasing, pacing, content organization, and more.

I find my coaching skills are very useful when facilitating programs. These skills create a useful pause to account for who is in my audience and requires that I ask more often than I declare. Some facilitators may find the need to reconcile personal philosophies with gender sensitivity expectations. Personal exploration may build awareness and curiosity to learn more. Personal relationships can offer insights that traditional sources may not be offer.

In your recently published article titled Organizational Systems' Effect on Training Success: Why Covering the Content Is Not Enough, you discuss the issue of training materials being too abstract and decontextualized. Could you provide a comparison of how a topic could be treated originally as

too abstract and decontextualized and then improved on?

This article discusses a typical problem that instructional designers in business and industry face. Our work is oftentimes constrained to budget and project timelines, which can lead to pressures relieved by taking short cuts. In this design case, the project timeline did not account for practice with the new system. The business leaders felt a step-by-step demonstration and accompanying guide was sufficient training. An instructional analysis that might have revealed factors such as the audience's prior experience, motivation to learn, and readiness for change. These could have influenced the decision to allow a test environment and time to practice.

Instructional designers may not always have a voice in business project plan composition. As a result, we rely on our persuasion skills to influence project planning and express the potential consequences of focusing on content alone. Improving this means building relationships with stakeholders and forming strategic partnerships with business leaders, not unlike the way HR professionals transformed into business partners in the 1990's (Ulrich et al., 1995; Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich, 1998; Losey, 1999; Ramlall, 2006).

References

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