

Using Appreciative Inquiry to develop a research capacity development programme

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Abstract

With academics struggling to find the balance between research and teaching, there is a need to identify strategies that would assist academics in making the necessary changes to manage their time. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strength-based change process based on the premise that academics are change agents who possess knowledge and experience that can make a difference. This article proposes an AI methodological framework for an academic development strategy focussing on integrating research into teaching. Currently, few measures exist that focus on assisting academics in incorporating research into their teaching and learning practices. The article aims to describe the strategies used to initiate a process that builds on the positive experiences of academics in teaching in an environment where academics may become overwhelmed when focussing only on barriers. The process described focuses on the aims of the academic development programme at each stage as well as the roles of the participants. The AI approach is a novel framework that can be used to initiate research capacity building among academics.

Keywords: academics, faculty development, appreciative inquiry, research

BACKGROUND

Research capacity building programmes are an important component of health professions education and are supported by the higher education institutions (HEIs) with the aim of improving faculty performance or enhancing the quality of faculty work life. In higher education, capacity development may refer to a broad range of activities that institutions provide to enhance the professional career growth of academics in their various roles (D'Auria 2000, 79) and assist academics with acquiring new skills; exploring more advanced educational resources; and developing insights into the pedagogy behind their teaching practices. Despite continuous

growth in educational research, there may be a challenge in integrating this research into health professions education. Over the past decade, HEIs have made attempts to understand the relationship between research and teaching. According to Brew (2010, 148), 'integrating research and teaching requires academics to think about what they mean by teaching and about how learning occurs for them as academics and for their students; to reconsider what they think research is and ideas about who generates it'.

However, a need exists for research capacity development programmes among academics involved in health professions education in order to assist them in incorporating research into their teaching and learning practices. Effective capacity development among academics is underpinned by six principles (Cooke 2005, 44). These are aimed at developing the individual as well as the institution, and include: (1) skill and confidence building; (2) developing networks and partnerships; (3) ensuring alignment between research and practice; (4) disseminating appropriate information; (5) investing in infrastructure; and (6) ensuring long-term sustainability and continuity of outcomes.

The Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research (FAIMER) is a good example of a capacity development initiative on an international level, guiding the creation of regional institutes like the South African FAIMER Regional Institute (SAFR) in South Africa (Burdick, Morahan and Norcini 2007, 65). The FAIMER approach is an example of a human capacity building programme which includes at least four of the key principles: (1) identifying young and talented individuals with the potential to become agents for change; (2) organising and delivering an effective learning intervention that is relevant for the local context; (3) facilitating opportunities for the real-life application of acquired knowledge and skills in the area of teaching and research; and (4) promoting the development of a sustainable career path with opportunities for growth and advancement (Nchinda 2002, 1702).

In evaluating the effectiveness of a capacity development initiative an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework can be used. This is a form of action research that attempts to help individuals, groups, organisations and communities create a new vision for themselves based on a positive understanding of their past experiences. Bushe and Kassam (2005, 163) describe AI as a systemic process that promotes learning and thinking outside the accepted limitations of a problem. This approach to learning in organisations is useful to promote innovation and foster transformational change within the individual and the organisation (Richer, Ritchie and Marchionni 2009, 953). There are several AI models derived from David Cooperrider's original 'Four D' process (Keefe and Pesut 2004, 104; Whitney and Schau 1998, 18) which include discovery (appreciating what it is and how it can be used), dream (imagining what might be), design (determining what should be) and delivery/destiny (create what will be) (Acosta and Douthwaite 2005, 2). This study used a model that includes an additional aspect of definition (establishing the focus and scope of the inquiry) to the original four aspects (see Figure 1).

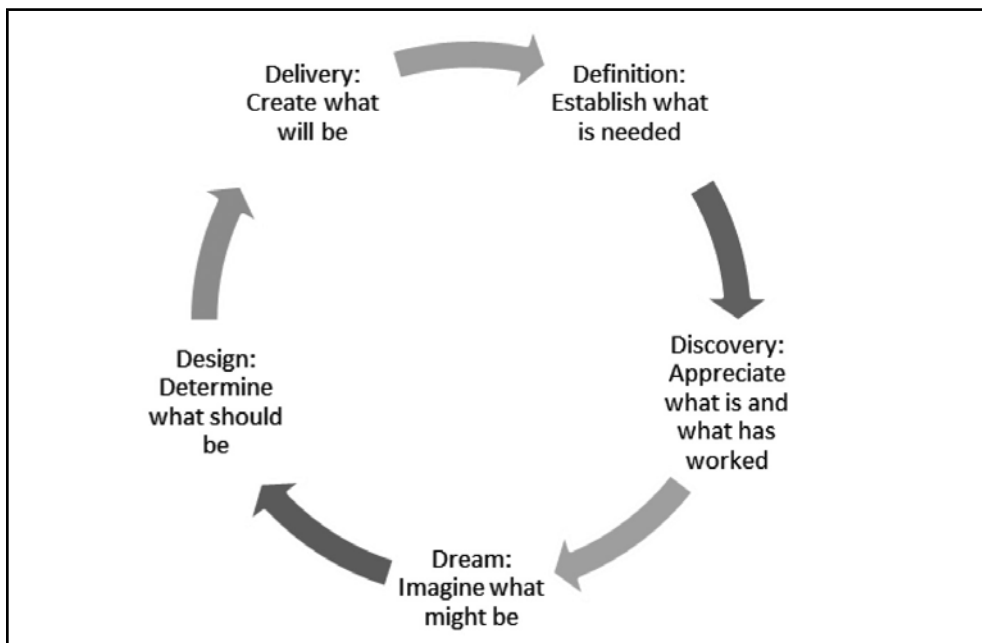


Figure 1: The five 'D' cycle of appreciative inquiry>

The positive, affirming nature of AI, where people discover, and then build onto the root causes of success rather than dissect problems, was used as the main motivator to stimulate change. Within the academic arena, various genres linked to the development of academics in the area of the scholarship of research have been identified and these include seminar presentation, conference presentation and journal article writing (Balfour and Lenta 2009, 15). The authors highlight a fourth genre where research is integrated into teaching and learning.

This article aims to describe the process of implementing a capacity development programme based on integrating research into teaching and learning using the AI approach. In addition, it reports on the strategic lessons that can be learned from facilitating this process for the implementation of faculty development programmes where research can be integrated into teaching and learning practices. Evaluation of the impact of the programme on the individual and the institution will be reported in a later article.

METHODS

Research setting

The scholarship of teaching and learning has become a priority at health science faculties in South Africa. At the University of the Western Cape the scholarship of teaching and learning has been highlighted as an area of priority along with research

and community engagement. The Faculty of Community and Health Sciences has highlighted the following goal as part of its teaching and learning plan for 2010–2014: ‘To provide opportunities for an excellent teaching and learning experience that is contextually responsive to the challenges of globalization and a society in transition, and which enhances students’ capacity as change agents’. This highlighted the need to identify opportunities for academics to evaluate teaching practices through research.

Research design

The study used a participatory action research methodology. According to Walter (2009, 1), the concepts of participation and action form the basics of the method. The author highlights that for the process of action, research should be more than just finding out; research should also involve an action component that seeks to engender positive change. In addition, participation highlights that research is a participatory process that requires the equal and collaborative involvement of the ‘community of research interest’. Participatory action research has four cycles, which include planning, acting, observing and reflecting. This method has proven to be successful in establishing a culture for professional development. AI was identified as a research methodology and change paradigm that aims to capture the positive characteristics of an organisation (or faculty members within the organisation) and to assist the individual members to strive for improved performance (Acosta and Douthwaite 2005, 3). Bushe (2011, 89) highlighted that ‘in the post-modern social constructionism of Appreciative Inquiry’ the questions used during this method of research is seen to assist in creating what is present in the group or organisation.

Participants

The programme aimed to offer a capacity development opportunity to junior academics from all disciplines in the Health Sciences Faculty. Departmental chairpersons were invited to purposively identify at least two junior academics (< 3 years teaching experience) to participate in this capacity development programme. Junior academics were targeted as the programme could be seen as part of the initiation process into higher education academia. Within the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences there are nine departments. Responses to the invitation were received from the departments of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Social Work, Natural Medicine, Sports and Exercise Science. Departments who did not respond to the invitation indicated that at the time of the programme, they did not have junior academics in their departments and one other department focussed primarily on postgraduate teaching.

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the ethics committee at the University of the Western Cape (11/3/14) and informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

Capacity development programme

Programme rationale

During the implementation of this capacity development programme, a case study approach was adopted, motivated by the desire to understand and explore a complex social phenomenon around implementing research into teaching and learning in a health science faculty. The focus is on a process which we do not yet fully understand. The present case is a faculty, which is bounded by time (one year of data collection) and place (one single faculty). The data that informed this study was drawn from the strategies used during the capacity development programme such as participant feedback, questionnaires, workshop results, outcomes and evaluations. A summary of the programme and its goals is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Capacity development programme

Activity	Goals and objectives	Format and AI stage	Duration
Integrating research into teaching and learning workshop	To introduce participants to the methodological research frameworks that can be used to evaluate teaching and learning strategies and to identify the current knowledge and practices	Interactive workshop (Defining and discovery stage)	1 day
Writing an educational research proposal	To assist in defining the objectives for an educational research proposal and writing a draft proposal for submission to the ethics board	Interactive writing retreat (Dream and design stage)	2 days
Monitoring	To support and monitor participants in the writing of the proposal and implementation of the proposal	Interactive one-on-one sessions (Delivery stage)	6 months
Feedback workshop	To reflect on the outcomes of the intervention and prepare for sharing of information	Focus group discussions (Delivery stage)	1–2 hrs
Writing for publication workshop	To write an academic paper on the educational intervention	Interactive writing retreat (Delivery stage)	3 days

Data analysis

The process followed and activities and objectives included during each phase of the AI stages will be presented and discussed. The results will be presented as they relate to each particular phase, the role of the capacity development programme and the role of the participant. The article aims to report on focussing on the process and not reporting the actual data obtained during each phase of the process.

RESULTS

Phase 1: Defining

Description of this phase

During this phase, the focus and scope of the inquiry was established. The questions asked during this phase included: ‘What is your understanding of research?’ and ‘What is your understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning?’ How do you incorporate research into your teaching modules?

Objective of the capacity development programme

A facilitator with an interest in capacity development drove the process. A needs analysis questionnaire was designed by the core group of facilitators to determine other academics perception and knowledge of integrating research into teaching and learning. During this phase of the process, the facilitators aimed to create an awareness of the practice of integrating research into teaching and learning. In addition, participants were expected to highlight and share their experiences of this practice. This helped define and guide the content of the programme in order to identify what would be needed to help academics incorporate research into their teaching and learning practices.

Activity for the participants

Participants completed the questionnaires and shared their current understanding of integrating research into teaching and learning as well as highlighting their experiences and areas they would need to be supported in.

How was the objective achieved?

During the process of completing the questionnaires, participants had time to reflect on the topic of integrating research into teaching and learning as well as to share their successful experiences with this process.

Phase 2: Discovery

Description of this phase

During this phase, the facilitators needed to recognise and evoke the potential of a group of young academics through positive inquiry. The questions that were asked during this phase included ‘What are the things that you do that helps you to incorporate research into teaching?’ and ‘What works best for you?’

Objective of the capacity development programme

Workshops were conducted with interested academics from five different departments in the faculty. The objective of this phase was to provide participants with information on how to incorporate research into teaching and learning and encouraged them to share experiences of various practices currently used in the various disciplines. Participants in the workshop were encouraged to use the information provided in the workshop and identify opportunities for integrating research into their teaching and learning practices. They then shared how these opportunities would improve their teaching practices with the bigger group.

Activity for the participants

During this phase, the participants reflected by means of a questionnaire on what they used to integrate research into teaching and learning (current practices) and how they integrated research into their teaching practices. They were also asked to reflect on what they would need to make it easier for them to incorporate research into teaching and learning. During this phase, opportunities to evaluate modules and teaching practices were identified and experiences on overcoming possible challenges were shared.

How was the objective achieved?

The presentation of possible solutions by the participants using the information (theoretical and educational frameworks) gained in the workshop was evidence that participants had thought about their own practices and how the information provided could assist them in future practices.

Phase 3: Dream

Description of this phase

Facilitators assisted the participants in connecting results from past experiences to possibilities for the future of the group. The questions asked during this phase included ‘What might be?’ and ‘How could you apply the information provided to evaluate what you are currently doing?’

Objectives of the capacity development programme

The programme had provided participants with information on how to incorporate research into their teaching and learning and had encouraged participants to reflect on what they were currently doing and how the information provided could be useful to them. The learning that the participants experienced during the workshop aimed to enhance their sense of self-efficacy in the classroom and gave them the confidence to experiment with new or different approaches. Participants identified their dream by highlighting their vision related to an educational intervention and possible implementation strategies

Activity for the participants

At the end of the first workshop, participants identified the possible educational frameworks and theories that they could use in the classroom to actively integrate research into teaching and learning in the modules they would be teaching in the next 6–12 months. Participants did presentations in order to get a deeper understanding of their interpretations of the educational interventions and how they could apply the knowledge gained during the workshops in their own teaching contexts/environments. Challenges and facilitators were identified but the group was encouraged to draw on the positives of others and plan an ideal intervention for themselves.

How was the objective achieved?

The participants presented their educational intervention and highlighted the possibilities and the possible challenges. By the end of the session, each participant had a blueprint of an educational intervention that they could apply to ensure that research is integrated into teaching and learning practice.

Phase 4: Design***Description of this phase***

Participants created a vision that represented an ideal for themselves within their own context group, which in this case was either the faculty or their respective department.

Objectives of the capacity development programme

A second workshop was held which focussed on proposal writing opportunities for an educational intervention that would assist participants in integrating research into teaching and learning. The structure of the capacity development workshop allowed the participants to identify their own dream with regard to their teaching needs and to develop initiatives in their research proposals to address the outcomes of their educational intervention.

Activity for the participants

Each participant identified a module they were teaching and then designed an educational intervention using at least one of the educational methods presented in the first workshop. Educational interventions focussed on a needs analysis, an intervention programme or a programme evaluation. The intervention strategy was written in the form of a proposal with an educational project that could be submitted for ethical clearance as a project. Participants were able to share their dreams by presenting their proposals to the group. From the discussions and feedback they received, participants were able to refine their proposals.

How was the objective achieved?

Evidence of the final proposal was submitted to the ethics committee for approval. From the participating group at least seven proposals were designed and submitted for ethical approval.

Phase 5: Delivery

Description of this phase

Participants created and implemented their educational programmes

Objectives of the academic development programme

This phase of the AI process is the most challenging. The objective of this phase is to implement the educational intervention during a semester. As part of the process of the capacity development initiative, participants were mentored during the process of implementing the intervention, and follow-up workshops were conducted in order for participants to provide feedback on the process.

Activity for the participants

During this phase, participants in the capacity development programme submitted a proposal for ethical clearance in which tangible outcomes and goals were identified. Participants were expected to implement their educational interventions.

How was the objective achieved?

Ethical clearance letters were obtained from the ethics committee and data evaluating interventions were collected.

DISCUSSION

The AI approach can be used to develop a capacity within a higher education setting. It is with the belief that everyone has a contribution to make to the bigger mission that this approach is used. During this process, participants use their own positive experiences of using research in teaching to reach their dreams.

Define, discover and dream phase

In the capacity development process reported here, participants were enthusiastic about and participated in the process by responding and providing detailed information and being willing to share their experiences. This was encouraged by the facilitators thereby creating a non-threatening environment for the participants. Literature highlights the importance of creating supportive environments (Pololi, Knight, Dennis and Frankel 2002, 383). The authors identified three factors that ensured programme effectiveness and these included: (1) providing a safe, supportive learning environment; (2) allowing dedicated time for programme participation and reflection; and (3) providing programme settings that were away from the work environment.

In addition, common interests were identified and when experiences were shared others could identify how they could apply the information in their own context. These characteristics were similar to a community of practice identified by Wenger (2004, 2). In a community of practice, participants share a passion for something they do and interact regularly to learn how to do it better. According to Serrat (2008, 3), communities of practice can function effectively when a similar approach to the AI approach is used. The author highlights that as a group, participants can discover other relationships (discovery), synthesise individual narrative (dream), develop operational processes (design), engage in learning and documenting knowledge (delivery) and the final stage is disseminating and reconnecting (disseminate). This is similar to the experience reported by Bland et al. (2002, 373) who highlighted the need from academics for increased time for building and maintaining collegial networks. Faculty development programmes can thus be used to assist in building <career-important relationships with peers, mentors, and academic consultants who enhance socialization skills and contribute to academic advancement> (Morzinskiv and Fisher 2002, 406).

Design and delivery phase

The design and delivery phase highlighted the challenges one can experience in faculty development programmes. There is a need for more mentoring and guidance during this phase as individuals function independently at this stage of the process. In the current process, even though participants were enthusiastic at the first workshop, there was attrition of participants by the next workshop. During the faculty development programme, the facilitators were able to prevent attrition during the first three phases namely: defining the problem; discovering what is good and works; and dreaming what might be. However, during the designing and delivery stages, the enthusiasm declined for various reasons. This attrition could possibly be due to their dreams and implementation strategies being threatened by the lack of time, clashes between the individual and possible departmental values. Several studies have emphasised the importance of mentoring, especially for junior staff (Bland et al. 2002, 375; Pololi et al. 2002, 384).

Sustainability

Although AI highlights the positive, there is still the challenge of maintaining this positive attitude after the workshops. As a research tool for change, AI may be used as it allows the opportunity for reflection on what works, designing appropriate interventions to build on what works and monitor the impact of the interventions. In most cases, AI is used in teams, but in this case interaction with the process was primarily driven by the individual. The challenge for this faculty development team is to ensure sustainability of the enthusiasm to incorporate research into teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

The change process began with a survey in which participants were able to reflect on their positive experiences linked to incorporating research into teaching and learning and discover their own capacity to make a difference. Through the AI process, the facilitators were able to promote growth in knowledge and the sharing of information. In addition the process allowed participants to talk through possible changes and how it can be applied. In addition, through the group, positive energy was generated to support each other to implement the change. However, there is still a challenge as to whether the change will be sustained. This challenge is linked to the fact that individuals identified their own goals within the broader theme. Lack of confidence by individuals and lack of resources could possibly result in lack of sustainability.

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