Insights from Using Appreciative Inquiry in a Course Evaluation

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Course context

CPSC 103

- first computing course on program design, intended for non-majors
- first offered in 2016W1 with 98 students
- course culminates in a project; students choose a data set that is related to their interests, design and implement a program to answer a question about the data, and present a “poster” to peers

Methods for course evaluation

- we are using surveys to gain a broad understanding of student experiences and attitudes in CPSC 103
- we are inviting all students and TAs to participate in Appreciative Inquiry focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of what students value in CPSC 103
  - after the first offering, 17/98 students and 3/7 TAs participated in the focus groups

Appreciative Inquiry

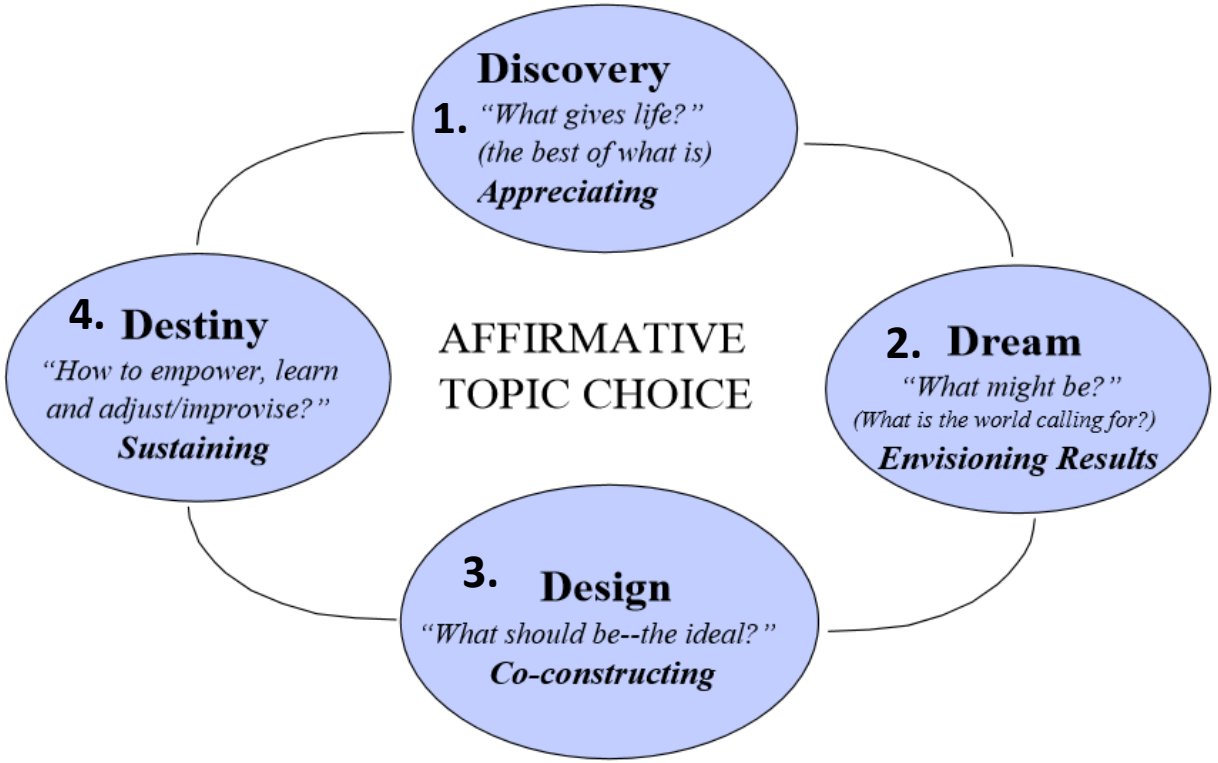
- is an action-driven participatory methodology that focuses on what's working well
- centers around an *affirmative topic* which is:

  a positively-framed statement that participants are interested in exploring and represents outcomes that participants desire

  – ours was "CPSC 103 at its best"

Cooperrider, D. L., Whitney, D. K., & Stavros, J. M. (2003). *Appreciative inquiry handbook* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Appreciative Inquiry



Appreciative Inquiry "4-D" Cycle

Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

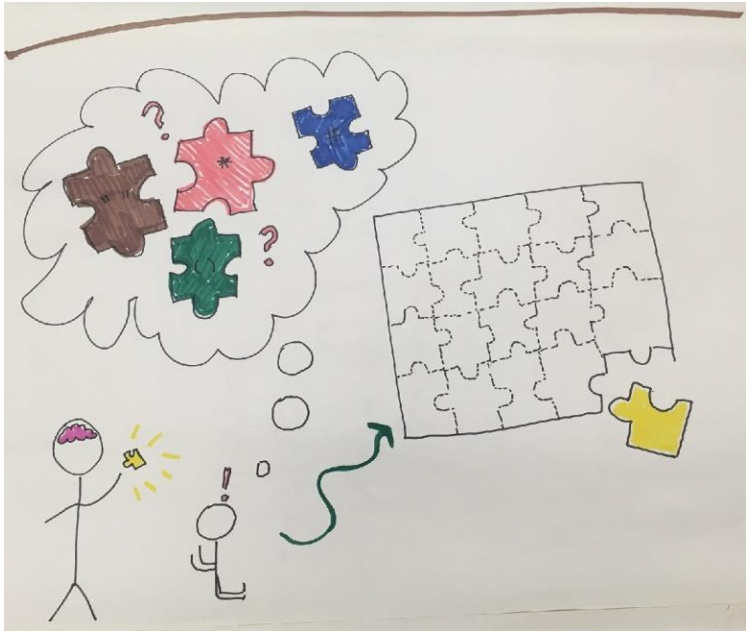
Our focus group plan

0. Welcome, storytelling icebreaker, overview

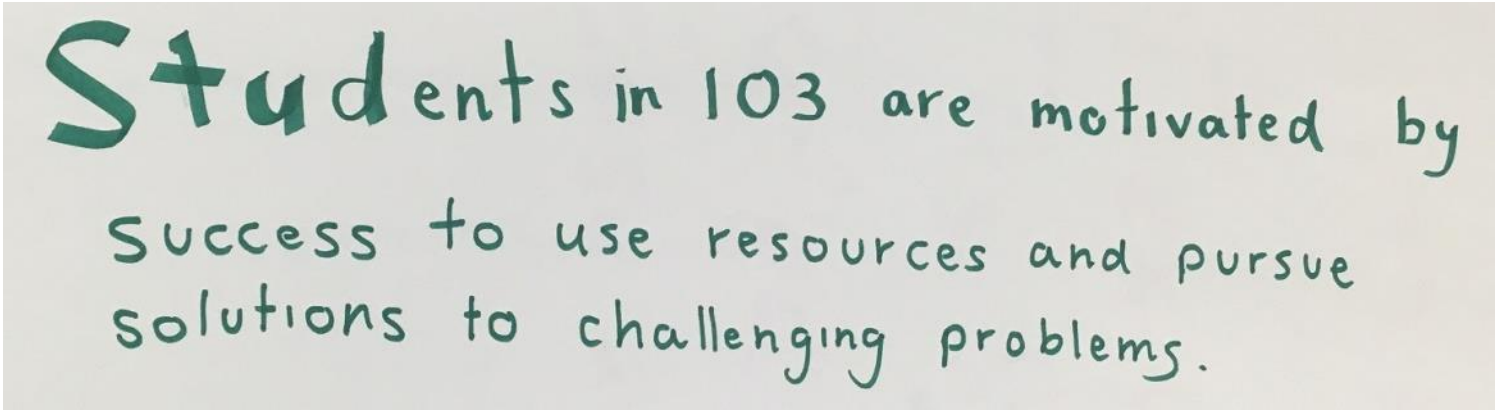
1. Discovery phase
- storytelling interviews in small groups
- identify themes from interviews
- gallery walk and vote for top priority themes

2. Dream phase

- in new small groups, draw a picture of CPSC 103 at its best

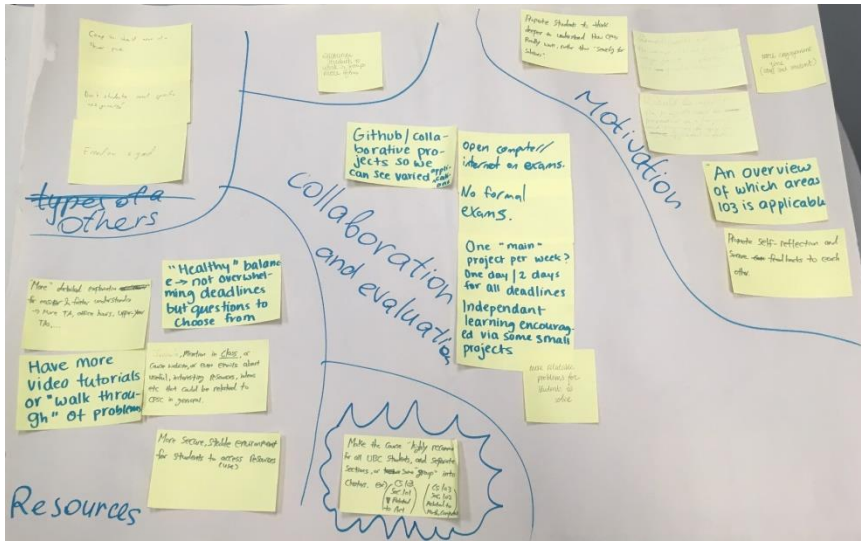


- write a proposition describing the image that provokes action towards CPSC 103 at its best



3. Design phase

- individually brainstorm ideas that enable the provocative propositions
- as a large group, cluster these ideas by theme



e.g.: *Independent learning encouraged via some small projects.*

4. Destiny phase (delivery)

- to be completed by course staff after the focus groups

This approach provided

- rich, actionable feedback that is **deeper** than what we see in survey responses and qualitatively **different** from what we see with “negative” approaches
- constructive ideas for the course’s future, grounded in time and energy committed to the AI process
- having each small groups focus on one high-priority theme highlighted a nice overlap with course design goals (e.g. flexibility of project topic)

Benefits and drawbacks of this approach

Benefits

- focus on positive feels good and builds course community
- meaningfully engages with students/TAs to drive course improvements
- provides deep, rich qualitative feedback

vs. qualitative methods

vs. quantitative methods

Drawbacks

- requires focus group facilitator training
- more expensive (time and money) than surveying alone

convincing scientists that AI is substantive is a challenge vs. **both** types

Suggestions for integrating AI into a course evaluation plan

- Students needed an outlet to share the things that weren't working well. Integrating AI into a larger evaluation plan gives them such an outlet.
- It's possible to integrate the AI philosophy without focus groups. For example, you can tailor your survey questions to ask about what is working well, what the students appreciate most, or what their best experience was.

Questions?

We'd be happy to answer any further questions you have.

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