

Natasha Taylor

Higher Education Academy, UK

The role of performance and narration in translating professional standards into practice: Four analytical models. (0251)

Programme number: N4.4

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

In 2013, the Higher Education Academy ran a new series of interdisciplinary workshops for new/early career teachers on narrating and performing practice. The aim was to bring the language of our disciplines and the language of academic practice with specific reference to how academics perform and narrate their own learning and teaching. We used a range of tools/approaches from different disciplinary perspectives to help participants reflect on their professional practice and explore their academic identities. Many of the participants were clear in their intention to use the workshops to help them prepare their applications for HEA Fellowship.

We will begin our roundtable discussion by presenting four different readings of the evaluation data from the workshops (social media, blogs, images, video recordings and follow-up interviews), from four different disciplinary perspectives. In this paper, I will examine the workshops through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a relatively new research methodology that is used to underpin change management in businesses or organisations. Increasingly, however, it is being used in the social sciences as an alternative to action research approaches which, critics say, are overly problem-focussed. AI is different in that it is solution-oriented, shifting focus onto the positive in order to energise people, bring clarity and inspire to change (Cooperrider and Sivrastva 1987). It uses a range of techniques including positive questioning, narrative and collaborative inquiry, and visualisation methods to empower participants to explore the past and the present, in order to drive future direction (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). There is growing evidence that these positive approaches work well in the HE context which is said to be inhabited by a '... morose breed with a limited capacity to look on the bright side of life' (Cousin 2009, p.172) and a collection of 'problematists and problemaholics' (Sloterdijk 1998, in Cooperrider 2001).

Whilst the workshops were not specifically designed to be part of a full-blown AI programme, the techniques and tools used drew heavily on AI principles and methodology. Importantly, what happened before, during and after the workshops can – and will - be evaluated from an AI perspective.

The workshops were designed to take participants on a brief journey from the past, to the present and through to the future. This was achieved by equipping them with a range of tools which they might find useful in devising a narrative account of their practice and to make plans for future professional development.

Drawing on the AI methods literature, especially where it has been applied to social science and educational research, I will explain how the use of narrative inquiry techniques and of visual depiction were used to empower participants from a range of disciplines to scrutinise their work and make plans for change. I will then assess how successful we were in encouraging participants to be reflective, expressive and determine a direction for their professional development without focussing on the problems and barriers they might encounter. I will give examples of stories and rich pictures produced by participants and explore the value of these methods using data from follow-up interviews and online discussions.

As mentioned previously, these were new workshops and, to an extent, experimental; thus it was essential to evaluate them in a robust way. Our broad research question focussed on discovering what elements worked, for whom, in what circumstances? This was measured in the first instance using a standard post-event survey. Viewed through the AI lens, however, this over-arching question was reworked into a series of 'envisioning' and 'peak moment' questions which were subsequently explored using additional qualitative methods. Examples included:

- ◆ What were the high points of the workshops?
- ◆ What elements did participants value most?
- ◆ Which strengths/talents did participants utilise?
- ◆ If participants could create any workshop that would bring out the best in them, what would it look like?
- ◆ How might participants go on to contribute more to a community of practice?

In the final part of the paper, I will argue that when the evaluation data – which includes data generated before, during and after the workshops - is analysed from this perspective, the successes and failures can be viewed in a fresh light. I will show how participants have helped us to reflect on the workshops and think about how we approach similar events in the future. We (the HEA team) acted as facilitators (leading activities and co-ordinating discussion), co-participants in the inquiry process (reflecting on our own practice) and as researchers (studying the impact and outcomes of the workshop series) and the paper will close with our own reflections on our experiences of managing these roles.

References:

Cooperrider, D.L (2001) 'Positive image, positive action: The affirmative basis of organizing' in Cooperrider, D.L. , Sorensen Jr.,P.F. , Yaeger, T.F. and Whitney, D. (Eds) *Appreciative Inquiry: An emerging direction for organizational development*. Champaign, IL. Stipes Publishing.

Cooperrider, D.L. and Sivrastva, S. (1987) 'Appreciative Inquiry in organisational life', *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1, 129-169.

Cooperrider, D.L. and Whitney, D. (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco, AC. Berrett-Kohler Publications.

Cousin, G. (2009) *Researching Learning in Higher Education*, Oxon: Routledge.