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ABSTRACT

What should the curriculum of a graduate program that focuses on education, technology, and society be? What would be the proper balance of skills, theory, and concepts? What should be the difference between such a program in the School of Education and a computer science program? What do students expect of such a program? These were questions with which the faculty of the Technology for Education and Training Program at the University of South Dakota wrestled with in spring 2001, at a time when the Master's and Specialist's degrees had been offered for 2 years. An "appreciative" program evaluation was conducted to address the questions the faculty had about the curriculum and to ascertain how the program was doing in general. This paper describes the process used to assess the Technology for Education and Training graduate program. The appreciative evaluation was designed to discover what was working well in the program and how offerings could be improved. The program evaluation was completed by 445 current and former students. Eight student evaluators interviewed faculty members and analyzed survey and interview data. The evaluation approach showed many things that were being done well and also resulted in recommendations for the improvement of the program. (Contains 36 references.) (SLD)

Appreciative Program Evaluation: A Qualitative Action Research Project

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Abstract

What should the curriculum of a graduate program that focuses on education, technology and society consist of? What would be the proper balance of skills, theory, and concepts? What should be the difference between such a program in a School of Education vs. a computer science program? What do students expect of such a program? These were questions the faculty of the Technology for Education and Training Program at the University of South Dakota were wrestling with Spring 2001. At this point, the Master's and Specialist degrees had officially been offered for two years. An "appreciative" program evaluation was conducted to address the questions the faculty had about the curriculum and to ascertain how the program was doing in general. This paper describes the process used to assess the Technology for Education and Training graduate program.

Introduction

In Spring 2001, the Technology for Education and Training Division at the University of South Dakota assessed the status of the current degree offerings and programs. At this point, the Technology for Training and Development (TTD) Master's and Specialist degrees had been officially offered for two years. The Master's degree had two tracks within it: one with a K-12 emphasis and one with a Training and Development emphasis. The Program was created to appeal to both K-12 teachers and those from non-school settings. K-12 students might be attracted to the Program to sharpen their skills in technology to prepare for becoming technology coordinators in their schools or simply to learn better how to integrate technology into their curriculum. Students in the Training and Development track might be attracted to gain skills to become instructional designers, trainers, or organizational development specialists in business and industry.

At this two-year mark, the faculty determined an assessment of the status of the program offerings was in order. They sensed some confusion on the part of students as to what the program was really about. Was it technology skill development? Was it more conceptual than that? What did it mean to develop leaders in the appropriate use of technology in school and non-school settings?

Eight students enrolled in Spring semester courses were recruited to help with this project. The assessment was an appreciative inquiry: an inquiry to discover what was working well in the program offerings and how the offerings could be improved (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999a). Rather than an inquiry into what wasn't working to determine what there should be less of, it was an inquiry into what was working and what there should be more of: getting rid of what we do not want does not mean we will get what we do want (Ackoff, 1999). It was also an action research project: the emphasis was on developing practical knowledge while engaging stakeholders (students) in the questioning, collection of data to address those questions, and sensemaking of the data

collected (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The project employed qualitative research methods and was conducted under the guidance of two Division faculty members.

Framing Evaluation Appreciatively

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a "cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999a, p. 10). AI differs from traditional organizational interventions in that it is not a method of problem solving. Instead of searching for the problem to solve, it begins with a search for the best of what is. It is a search to discover the life-giving forces of the system and to identify what the system wants "more" of. The Program faculty wanted to know what the students valued about the current program structure and offerings and what we should be doing "more" of. By using an evaluative approach that focused on what was working, we would gain information about the strengths of the program; this in turn would create positive forward momentum. We also decided to make this a project for a Program Evaluation course co-taught by two Division faculty members that semester. By making it a course project, students would gain practical experience in conducting a program evaluation and would also be engaged as stakeholders in the Program. The goal was to discover the best of what we had and use it to create a "collective image of a desired future," (Mohr, Smith & Watkins, 2001, p. 292) engaging both faculty and student stakeholders.

Appreciative Inquiry provided the framework for the program assessment. This is a framework based in the idea that every system has good and bad in it; we typically focus on the bad. AI provides a structure for searching out the "goodness" in the system. Four basic types of questions are crafted when using the AI framework. The questions are crafted to elicit the "best of" the current system and to understand how these are "life-giving" factors. They are stated in the affirmative, using positive language; are presented as an invitation; evoke storytelling; are phrased in the vernacular; are sometimes ambiguous; direct us to value what is (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999b). The data collected comes primarily in the form of stories: we knew students (former and current) would have stories to share about their experiences in the Program and would be more likely to share them with a fellow student rather than a faculty member. Both the Division faculty and the students who conducted the actual assessment crafted the questions used for the program evaluation.

To set the storytelling mode, the first type of question asked in AI is a "deep story question" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999b). This question asks the interviewee to tell a story about a peak experience or high point. They are encouraged to describe who was involved, what made it a peak experience, what they did to make it a peak experience, what others contributed to make it a peak experience. We had two "deep story" questions:

1) *Why did you choose this program?*

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2) *Share a highlight of your time so far in the TTD Program. As you share your story, consider the following: What made it a high point? Who was involved? What did they do that made it a good experience? What did you do that made it a good experience?*

The second type of question has to do with valuing the system (in this case, the Program) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999b). The interviewee is asked what they value about the system. The third type of question is the "core factors" or life-giving question: What gives "life" to the system? (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999b). This question elicits the specifics about what gives life to the system and seeks to understand why it gives life. Rather than identify the causes of a problem, this question asks the interviewee to ponder the best of the system and understand these factors as deeply as we typically understand what is wrong and why it is wrong. We crafted a question that captured both of these concepts: *Based on your experience so far, what do you value most about the Program? What would you define as core characteristics of the Program (without these, the Division and Program would not be what it is)? Please be specific.*

The fourth type of question is the "future" question (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999b). This is the question that invites people to dream about the ideal future of the system. To elicit these ideas, we asked, *If you were the "Student-in-Charge" of this Program and could have three wishes for the program granted, what would you wish? How would the Program be different if your three wishes were incorporated into the curriculum?*

We also had some practical concerns. For instance, some of the courses in this Program are delivered using distance technologies. We knew there was dissatisfaction among some of the students with the distance delivery of courses. We also knew that distance delivery of courses was not going away, so we wanted to find out how this could be improved.

The questions all students were asked follow:

- 1) Why did you choose this Program?
- 2) Share a highlight of your time so far in the Program. As you share your story, consider the following: What made it a high point? Who was involved? What did they do that made it a good experience? What did you do that made it a good experience?
- 3) Based on your experience so far, what do you value most about the Program? What would you define as core characteristics of the Program (without these, the Program and Division would not be what it is)? Please be specific.
- 4) If you were the "Student-in-Charge" of the Program and could have three wishes for the program granted, what would you wish? How would the Program be different if your three wishes were incorporated into the curriculum?

5) Many of the courses are delivered partially or fully using distance technologies such as Web CT and interactive video. What is it like to be in such a class? What courses have you had that are actually (or you believe would be) better delivered in a distance format? What role do you believe distance technologies should play in the future of the Program?

On the surface, it may appear we only wanted to hear good comments and not find out about actual problems students may be having with the Program. That was not our intent, and in fact, using the AI framework, we (the faculty and students) discovered "the richness of data gained from the four generic questions allows many more questions to be answered" (Mohr, Smith & Watkins, 2001, p. 313). Particularly, as students described their wishes for the future of the Program, problems and criticisms surfaced. However, because the focus was on what was going right, it was easier to turn those problems and criticisms into positive recommendations. A creative, generative energy is engendered when using an AI approach (Norum, 2001).

Methods

Qualitative research methods were employed for this project. Specifically, narrative inquiry and action research methods were used. The interviews conducted were considered to be conversations with a purpose (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The students conducting the evaluation were asking questions they and the faculty truly wanted answers to and they listened responsively to those answers. Data from a web-based questionnaire and interviews were analyzed by the students who conducted the interviews. They identified themes and patterns that formed the basis of the evaluation report.

Each interview conducted yielded a narrative: a story about the person's experience so far with the Program, their hopes and wishes for its future, and perhaps their concerns. Thus, the students were engaged in narrative inquiry (Abma, 1999; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1995). This is a specific form of qualitative research and while narrative as research may be relatively new to education, it has been used in other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, literary theory, anthropology and history for some time (Casey, 1995-96; Cortazzi, 1993; Josselson, 1993). It is quite natural for us to think narratively. Life is informed and formed by stories (Widdershoven, 1993). Narratives occur naturally (Cortazzi, 1993) and help us make meaning of life's episodes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Daloz, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995; Reason & Hawkins, 1988; Simmons, 2001). It is quite common for people to explain their actions or relate an experience through telling a story. "We think and see in terms of stories because we are stories" (Feige, 1999, p. 87). Narrative inquiry is a heretical research method (Norum, 1998) because this method is a deliberate attempt to bring divergent points of view on issues to the forefront (Levin & Riffel, 1997). The form paints a different kind of picture, allowing for different and possibly new kinds of understandings (Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Because the practitioners were also the researchers, the students were also engaged in an action research project. Reason and Bradbury (2001) describe action research as a “participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing” (p. 1). The emphasis in action research methods is practical research based in (this case) qualitative methods. It takes everyday things in life and unpacks them (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995) by engaging people in a deeper understanding of their organization (Carr, 1997). A primary aim is to produce knowledge and action based on that knowledge that is directly useful to the group involved (Reason, 1998). Experiential knowledge is honored (Bray, Lee, Smith, Yorks, 2000; Reason, 1998). It is a collaborative process: the people who were involved in collecting the data are also involved in disseminating and applying results (Quigley, 1997). Those who would directly feel the effects of changes in the system are involved in shaping what those changes might be. Stakeholders (in this case, students) are involved in the questioning, the collection of data to address those questions, and sensemaking of the data collected (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

The Process

In designing the process to be used, the students who conducted the evaluation suggested posting the questionnaire on the web and inviting former and current students to complete and submit it to a generic e-mail address. A generic e-mail address was used instead of a specific person's e-mail address: there was a concern that if the completed questionnaire went to someone specific, that might discourage some people from filling it out. We created a Program e-mail address. After receiving the completed questionnaires, the students conducting the evaluation followed up with a phone or face-to-face interview. The web-based questionnaire used the questions described earlier; these questions also provided the foundation for the follow up interviews.

An e-mail invitation to complete the web-based questionnaire and play a role in shaping the future of the Program was sent to 72 current and former Program students. Students who had graduated, those who had taken classes but were not currently enrolled, and current students were invited to participate in this program evaluation project. They were told that a current student would contact them whether they completed the questionnaire or not. If they did not want to be contacted, they had to let us know they were choosing not to participate. Less than six students asked to not be contacted. Some students could not be contacted—the contact information we had turned out not to be valid. In the end, 44 students participated in the Program evaluation.

One of the challenges with qualitative research is not so much in collecting the data, but what to do with it once you have it! Each of the eight students who conducted the Program evaluation was assigned nine students to contact or follow up with. As mentioned above, some students could not be contacted and in the end, data was collected from 44 students (including the students conducting the Program evaluation). The task was to take the interview data from 44 people and move from individual stories to a co-created story. This was done by searching for themes and refrains (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997): an idea that runs through all or most of the data or one idea with heavy

impact. Patterns were identified by looking for repeated relationships. Each of the eight students analyzed their interview data on an individual basis; then a group analysis of the data was conducted. The process was similar to that of reconstructing a jigsaw puzzle: puzzle pieces were identified within each individual data set and each data set became a piece of the overall evaluation project puzzle. The findings that emerged from this analysis provided the framework for the recommendations and report that were created.

All students participated in writing the report. A smaller group of students presented the results of the report to the Division faculty. The Division Faculty met within a month of receiving the report recommendations and identified actions to take and commitments to make.

Living the Process: A Story about the Stories

According to Liebler (1997), "The process of doing the appreciative interviews is as important as the data collected, for it is through the doing that the internal conversations within organizations are changed." The student interviewers themselves were changed in carrying out the interviews as they gained new knowledge of the how the respondents felt about the TTD Program, and in turn examined how they themselves felt about it. In the process of conducting it, they also found research "is a lived practice" that is shaped by and shapes the researcher (Sumara & Carson, 2001, p. xiii).

When the students received their contact lists for carrying out the evaluation project, they took pause to think of how to best to make the process rewarding for both actors in the process, given what they now knew about the project. The eight student evaluators first interviewed each other in pairs, using the questionnaire, to get in gear and note areas that might offer problems or needed clarification in obtaining qualitatively measurable results. This process led them to think more deeply about their own responses while explaining them face-to-face. Writing a reaction is one thing, and developing a larger picture orally is another. A little gentle prodding often summoned up a story that served to strengthen an observation or sharpen a point.

Then it was time to contact the people on their list. Typically an interview was initiated by thanking the participant for their time, thoughts and candor to start the session on an appreciative note. Next, the main themes of the assessment were reiterated to set the stage for the individual questions: we were looking for positive perceptions and experiences in this educational program and recommendations for what they wanted more of now and in the future. After all, as Program enrollees and graduates, they were the best source to quarry for answers about how well the Program was serving its target audience and larger society in general. Were their objectives being met by what they learned or were learning at present? If they had concerns about aspects of the program, could they pose some constructive wishes to improve upon it, wave a magic wand so to speak? In this respect, their responses could emphasize positive ways to strengthen the Program rather than negative views of problems to be solved.

Although apprehensive at first (after all, why would someone want to share their experiences with someone they had never met?), the students conducting the evaluation were impressed and delighted by the stories they heard, especially those about peak experiences in the Program and how learning was already enhancing daily lives. For example, one current student was directly applying the methodology she had learned to a corporate training program in a national travel firm. Others were using the concepts and techniques in their leadership efforts in introducing and enhancing computer-based learning in K-12 classrooms. The student evaluators' mental models were being changed and elaborated with each story, and the Program became more of a living system in relation to real-life projects and processes. We connected with each other and with our course work more and more as the interviews proceeded, and the appreciative nature of our investigation brought forth positive feelings and perceptions that otherwise may not have been so strongly sensed and expressed.

As we probed our fellow students' feelings about objectives and future goals and how the Program was meeting their needs and expectations, we formed a clearer vision of what the Program could and should be. We found out that "educational technology" meant many things to many people. There was an expressed need for becoming conversant with technical trends in education and how best to integrate new tools and methods into the classroom or other learning environments. Many saw educational technology as a wave of the future, and wanted to increase their comprehension of a new phenomenon in general and their practice of it in particular. Many were continuing their education at a distance from the university, and were very grateful to have the courses offered at a distance, with occasional face-to-face meetings with classmates and faculty at a designated learning center near them during the semester.

Several themes emerged. The participants valued the availability and flexibility of courses, and the transferability and marketability of skills they were mastering. Those at a distance and with employment or family obligations especially appreciated instructors who devoted extra effort to accommodate their needs. The passion of instructors who dedicated themselves to their knowledge field and student needs was cited as a core characteristic. Many felt that they were keeping on the edge of technology with the Program and were excited about the group interactions they were having in both face-to-face and virtual classrooms. The participants' stories about dealing with their own students, families and career obligations brought the academics of the Program alive: we all felt part of a mission that was being successfully played out as we completed personal life goals. Hence its narrative feature could have made the assessment itself a highlight of the Program for the student evaluators.

It was gratifying to hear eager replies denoting an authentic willingness to participate in a study which could serve to enhance the efforts that all stakeholders were putting forth in the interests of educational excellence in the Department: administration, staff, faculty and students alike. Perhaps this was because the conversation was student-to-student rather than student-to-faculty, allowing for unfettered dialogue. Interviewees candidly voiced their concerns in constructive ways to suggest improvement in many areas, trusting their views would be respected and taken seriously by the Division. Because the

students conducting the interviews were also interviewees themselves, they could be regarded as facilitators of the process rather than authority figures. We were all in this together, and fellow students were trusted to represent the findings of the evaluation accurately and fairly. The action research nature of the study gave everyone expectations that the outcomes would have a positive impact on the methods and content of the Program.

The Faculty Response

While all eight student evaluators conducted interviews, analyzed the data, and wrote the evaluation report, a smaller group presented the recommendations from the project to the Program faculty. The faculty were extremely attentive and inquisitive about the details of the findings as the student presenters alternatively explained sections of the report and answered questions. The action research had unearthed student views they had not before heard with regard to some aspects of the program: advantages and limitations of distance classes, significance of hands-on experience in various technologies, and so on. The very meaning of "educational technology" in general could widely vary among students who had entered the Program with differing knowledge levels and objectives.

The Appreciative Inquiry approach revealed the Division was doing many things right and needed to continue to build on those strengths. It also revealed areas that were in need of improvement. Several recommendations were made to the faculty. A meeting was held approximately one month after receiving the Report Recommendations where the faculty identified actions to take and commitments to make.

The first action taken was to revisit and revise the mission statement of the Division to reflect the continuing philosophy of teaching concepts over specific skills. The revised mission statement was shown to students in a summer course, all of whom had conducted the Program evaluation or participated in it. They agreed the new statement did a better job of conveying the true intent of the Program. Several other actions and commitments were made. It was agreed that an Orientation Program would be scheduled during the first week of each semester. Starting a web-based newsletter was considered. The newsletter could be a promotion and communication tool as well as provide a place to highlight accomplishments of students (current and former) as well as faculty. Instituting brown bag lunch seminars (primarily for faculty but open to students) was also discussed. The brown bag lunch seminars would be used for faculty members to share their expertise with one another as well as further each other's learning by keeping current in the field. It was agreed that a face-to-face component would be part of every class as much as possible; however, it was also acknowledged that due to limited resources, it might not be possible to offer each course in both distance and face-to-face delivery formats.

What We Learned

On the surface, it would appear that by framing questions positively (which is a hallmark of AI), problems and concerns would be glossed over. However, this was not the case. We found that when students had a concern, they voiced it. The difference in using the AI approach is that instead of dwelling on the "problem," the conversation focuses on suggestions for what could be done about it. A generative energy is created as possibilities unfold. We all emerged with a far better view of what the Program was accomplishing, where it might be falling short, and what could make it even better. In informing each other through positive questions and responses, we became excited and energized to put forth our best efforts on all fronts toward achieving excellence. In this process, it became clear that the Program could be strengthened by keeping what was valued, discarding what was not valued, and creating what did not currently exist but was envisioned by both faculty and students.

Ludema (2000) tells us that "social knowledge and organizational destiny are tightly intertwined...all inquiry into organizational life should be collaborative" (p. 281). This project as a whole can be regarded as a collaborate effort at constructing knowledge of what the Division was attempting to achieve and how well program goals were being met by all involved. The student evaluators and students interviewed engaged in a dialogue from which new understanding was reached about their own and others' roles in making the Program a success. Employing the "art and science of asking powerful, positive, questions"(Cooperrider, 2000, p. 123) led us away from a path of negativity, criticism and "spiraling diagnosis" and to a path of "discovery, dream, and design" (Cooperrider, 2000, p. 124).

The combination of AI, narrative inquiry, and action research elicited stories rich in data. Those who participated in the Program evaluation willingly shared their stories. Embedded in the stories were practical suggestions and recommendations for the stakeholders (faculty and students) of the Program. While serious issues surfaced and were addressed, valuable information, key insights, and pleasant surprises made this an evaluation report that was acted upon rather than relegated to a bookshelf to collect dust. Perhaps this is evidence that supports Davenport and Prusak's statement: "Human beings learn best from stories" (1998, p. 81).

Appreciative Program Evaluation in Higher Education

What we choose to study and measure in the evaluation process is a sign of what is valued in the system. We typically use the evaluation process to identify what we need less rather than more of. The AI approach inquires into a program's successes and in practice, is an inquiry into discovering what gives life to that system. A basic tenant of AI is that a system will move in the direction of what it is studying. If this is true, what we choose to evaluate and how we evaluate it becomes fateful:

When we inquire into the things in our organisations that are life giving, we begin to understand that we can choose to focus on those qualities. Through asking others to join in our inquiry, we can have a considerable impact on the image of our organisation and, ultimately, on the way it functions (Mohr, Smith & Watkins, 2001, p. 315).

Program evaluation is something that we are all called upon to do in Higher Education. Often, the evaluation focuses on problems and what is wrong with the program. Appreciative Inquiry offers an approach that highlights what the program is doing right and what it could be doing “more” of. It may provide a particularly useful framework for monitoring courses and has, in fact, been used by one of the authors for the traditional end-of-the-semester-course evaluation (Norum, 2001). Concerns and problems will still be identified. The refreshing aspect is that instead of dwelling on those “problems,” a creative, generative energy is engendered. By identifying what is being done “right,” programs can be strengthened by keeping what is currently valued, discarding what is not valued, and creating what does not currently exist but is envisioned by both faculty and students.

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