

# Scholars, Teachers, Practitioners, and Students: Learning by Fishing, Storytelling, and Appreciative Inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

Learning within the public affairs community can be improved by focusing on the medium and frame, as well as on the message. Stories, plays, videos, and other art forms offer media through which complex information can be shared among scholars, teachers, practitioners, and students.

Appreciative inquiry provides a frame that builds on organizational and individual strengths rather than looking for and seeking to correct problems. In addition to generating useful information for research purposes, appreciative inquiry assumptions contribute to a learning culture by empowering the practitioner or student. Sharing information in a participative environment facilitates the adoption of new frames to conceptualize reality for all who are involved.

Poor communication between scholar and practitioner, and teacher and learner, appears to be a common problem that affects whether and how theories are applied in the public sector. Ralph Hummel (1998) describes modern theorists as “jacking deer”—an expression analogous to shooting fish in a barrel or dynamiting them in a lake—as they frame their topics and then offer proofs to support their theories. He implies that theorists distance themselves from practitioners, and he advocates advancing theory by listening to practitioners and grounding theory in practice.

It is likely that most of us teachers have heard from students at one time or another that the information they receive in an master of public affairs class is not practical. Hugh Miller and Cheryl King (1998) agree that social science has not produced the basic knowledge that practitioners need. They differentiate the goals of scholars and practitioners and describe the scholar-practitioner relationship as entanglement, a socially constructed false dualism (King, 1998). This false dualism between theory and practice implies a semantic problem at the least, and perhaps an even more complicated relationship in which some scholars and practitioners have emotional blinders to the concerns and contributions of the other.

Hummel's picture of dissociation between theorists and practitioners and the Miller/King image of entanglement both lead to the same result: collectively, we are not communicating. Facts, values, definitions, and perspectives are all involved in the usual (non?) discussion between theorists and practitioners. Whether the appropriate descriptor is dissociation, entanglement, or irrelevance, members of the public administration community agree that we can do a better job of communicating. And we should. Here, we suggest some ways to improve communication and learning, including theory and practice, in our classes and organizations through the medium of storytelling within a framework of appreciative inquiry.

#### COMMUNICATING

We define communication as what is heard rather than what is said, and posit that the audience often does not understand what the speaker intends. Failed communication results if the language is emotionally unacceptable or if words and phrases are incomprehensible.

#### *Emotionally Unacceptable Language*

In providing a session on Total Quality Management (TQM) to a governmental agency, O. C. McSwite (1998) found that the agency sought perfection by reducing errors rather than incremental improvement by innovating and learning from errors. The agency claimed to be following Deming's notion of TQM, but it misunderstood Deming's argument. Deming states that maintaining a goal of perfection is the enemy of improvement (Gitlow and Gitlow, 1987). He argues that perfection is both impossible and undesirable; yet perfection, defined as eliminating errors, was that organization's goal. The desire to be perfect subverted the Deming message and allowed the organization to maintain its preconceived belief that it was striving for TQM. Nothing Deming wrote or McSwite said penetrated the audience. Potentially useful ideas for reform cannot overcome the resistance of deeply ingrained beliefs. Messages that have been distorted in translation, as this agency distorted TQM, suggest emotional/ideological blinders hindering effective communication.

#### *Incomprehensible Language*

Public administration scholars who write for *Public Administration Review*, *American Review of Public Administration*, *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, or *Public Administration Quarterly* are unlikely to find large numbers of practitioners among their readers because the academic vocabulary that scholars employ discourages the potentially interested practitioner. The McSwite paper, like other scholarly public administration writing, contains useful information for practitioners, but that information is not being received. We are not blaming students, practitioners, scholars, or the system; we are simply

asserting a teacher-learner divide. How can we overcome the blockage or narrow the gap? How can we communicate effectively?

The answers, easy to say and difficult to do, are to motivate the audience: to tune in the message—to convince practitioners, scholars, teachers, and students that all have something worth hearing—and then to communicate the message in an acceptable and understandable language and frame. To communicate effectively, each party must know what it is doing, consider its audience, and tailor the medium and message accordingly. The primary burden falls heavily on the authority figure—scholar, teacher, or senior manager—to model appropriate behavior.

#### KNOWING WHAT WE ARE DOING:

##### FISHING VERSUS DEAD FISH

Karl Weick (1979, 27-29) uses a fish story to describe what he means by "knowing what we are doing." Weick differentiates a laboratory account of the structure of a fish, the Mexican Sierra, from the fisherman's experience of hooking one and struggling to land it. He quotes from Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*:

The Mexican Sierra has 17 plus 15 plus 9 spines in the dorsal fin. These can easily be counted. But if the Sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being—an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman.

The only way to count the spines of the sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff colorless fish from the formalin solution, count the spines, and write the truth.... There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed—probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself (Steinbeck 1941, 2-3).

Hummel (1998) recounts being challenged by a student-practitioner who reported that Hummel's lecture, drawn from a standard public administration introductory text, did not describe the student's work environment. Hummel likely was accurately describing the dead fish, while the student wanted to learn about fishing.

Public managers are usually more interested in fishing than in describing dead fish. A good city manager loves budget presentations at council meetings where she can pit her wits against council, demonstrate her mastery of the numbers and her knowledge of how the various initiatives can contribute to city progress, and show her ability to draw council into agreement on how the city will tax and spend for the coming year.<sup>1</sup>

A prison warden, chatting with colleagues during the coffee break at a management development seminar, said, "During a [prison] riot is when I really get going as a manager—seeing what needs to be done, taking charge of the situation, telling people to go here and there, getting things under control."

Outstanding managers relish the competitive challenge no less than do Peyton Manning on the football field, Chamique Holdsclaw on the basketball court, or Steinbeck doing battle with the Mexican Sierra.

A colleague gets excited over statistically significant time series correlations in traffic accident data. For him and other policy scholars, that's fishing. For a practitioner, that's likely a dead fish. Each scholar has his or her own area of interest that generates excitement—those things that are understood deeply, and scientifically—whether those issues are pragmatism, gender questions, or helping organizations become more effective. Scholars speaking to each other within the academy can use any mutually intelligible language; however, if the audience is practitioners or students, scholars need to consider a medium that does not erect barriers. Figure a way to help them learn to fish.

#### STORIES AS MEDIUM

To span divides and to facilitate a receptive environment, the arts are useful, and stories are a particu-

larly effective medium. Stories operate on multiple levels of understanding and are enjoyable, nonthreatening, memorable ways to communicate important truths. Stories tap into our psyches and give us an experience that can be incorporated into an enhanced sense of self. Stories are a medium of communication with a number of advantages:

1. Because they describe others, stories do not blame or criticize the listener. The listener, a bystander to the "play," feels no need to erect barriers to defend against the author's points.
2. Listeners have the freedom to identify with any role and to pick their own heroes and villains.
3. Listeners have the freedom to choose the lessons they wish to learn.
4. The effect of a story may not emerge for considerable time. The imagery sticks with the reader and emerges unexpectedly in connecting to an event.
5. For a manager, stories constitute valid knowledge (Hummel, 1991).

Therefore, we infer that communicating with practitioners and students by stories is an effective means to pass on our message. Although simple, stories can describe the nuances of a complicated reality; they direct learners to the fish in the water. If scholars talk to practitioners about dead fish when practitioners want to hear about fishing, effective communication is unlikely to take place. Scholars can use stories to communicate with practitioners and students; practitioners and students communicate with one another and with scholars by telling stories (Olshfski and Cunningham, 1998). Stories also can be used in research and for organizational development (Mirvis, 1990) and they connect readily to appreciative inquiry.

#### APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A FRAME

Appreciative inquiry identifies and builds on strengths in areas important to personal or organizational effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> In research, appreciative

inquiry reframes the situation: instead of employees as objects to be studied or changed, employees are subjects who direct the research by offering stories of organizational strengths and recommending goals and strategies for improvement.

Appreciative inquiry is a framework, an approach, to whatever activity in which one engages. By avoiding problems and instead focusing on strengths, the energy of the group turns positive rather than defensive and works cooperatively and generatively rather than by circling the wagons and being protective of one's own expertise and resources. Barge and Oliver (2003) point out that appreciative inquiry may allow participants to avoid the difficult issues of confrontation and that ignoring issues of power will destroy implementation. Failing to confront, or ignoring power issues, will imperil any organizational development intervention. Those consequences are not unique to appreciative inquiry. Any organizational development intervention must take care to confront and address questions of power.

The usual protocol in social science field research on an organization involves defining the problems and the variables to be analyzed, receiving permission from the head of the organization being studied to conduct the research, then imposing the approved framework on employees within the organization. The people being studied have little say in constructing the agenda.

It is our belief that people in organizations do not care much for being studied by scholars or consultants and do not take pleasure in being forced to participate in organizational development sessions. This relationship between investigator and subjects likely has a negative impact on research validity. Public administration academics can sympathize with these feelings when they undergo a university-mandated program review, prepare documents for NASPAA accreditation, or host a NASPAA site visit team. The outsider's role in the usual organization or program analysis protocol is to discover what is wrong and to suggest what should be done to fix it. As a result of the expected criticism from those in power positions, defensiveness often arises in the person or organization during the course of the investigation.

Appreciative inquiry is an alternative for approaching and achieving social change. Argyris et al. (1985) argue that a good way to learn about the world is to try to change it. Appreciative inquiry seeks to instigate change by cooperating with the members of the organization and makes the following positive assumption: the organization is doing something right, and members of the organization are the experts who can contribute to making the organization better. Employee views of organizational strengths are shared through stories of commitment, cooperation, and the achievement of peak performance. By involving employees through the telling of these success stories, one gathers a picture of the culture and of the myths that they believe about the organization.

Bob Cunningham's personal experience with appreciative inquiry in a mental health institution demonstrated the promised effect. Observations on the wards and interviews with doctors, nurses, and psychological technicians emphasized both a universal commitment to the interest of the patient and a belief that the other two professions did not share a similar level of commitment. The researchers pointed out that the priority of the patient was a value shared by all employees of the organization. Then, diverse interests—doctors, nurses, and front-line technicians—were paired and engaged in one-on-one conversations about ways to improve patient care, how to cooperate, and how to benchmark patient progress. The appreciative inquiry approach—emphasizing the shared salient value of commitment to the patient—avoided defensiveness, thereby focusing the energies of all stakeholders on building on an organizational strength.

#### TELLING AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY STORY THROUGH VIDEOTAPE

Narrative and stories are the usual media for reporting appreciative inquiry research and accomplishments, but other media can be used. Referring to the complexity of messages and the place that visual representation has in communication, Gregory Bateson (1972, 137) quotes Isadora Duncan: "If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it." Even if a story can express the

experience effectively, a visual representation offers an additional dimension.

A twenty-minute videotape, "The Culture of Innovation," depicts an organization intervention by Gib Akin with a seven-member analysis lab team at the University of Virginia Hospital.<sup>3</sup> Akin first explained the process and then listened to staff member stories to develop an appreciation for the lab's culture and procedures—for example, the process and flow—and what each team member liked about his or her work environment. Then he scheduled a series of meetings with the lab team.

In the first group meeting, Akin diagrammed in a concept map his perception of the activities that went on in the lab and what products went out. After noting each step in the process, Akin asked the staff if his representation was correct and if his use of terminology was familiar to them. They suggested changes to the map, and in a second meeting Akin presented an updated diagram. He then asked staff members to talk about what they believe works well in the lab. Lab team members were charged with identifying improvement targets—not to fix what was wrong—but to improve what was already working well. These improvements were to be experimental; lab technicians were informed that they could always go back if they chose. The goal was find ways to achieve small wins. The lab workers were to bring their ideas back for a third meeting.

The video images of the first two meetings communicate discomfort from the lab team. Scowls, frowns, and blank expressions are common as the camera pans the table of participants while Akin describes the steps of the inquiry and his model of work flow in the organization. Only the group leader is smiling and supportive. Akin opens the third meeting by reviewing the previous meeting and asking whether they have brought any ideas to the meeting. After a short hesitation, one technician says,

I hope we don't ruin this meeting, but the momentum from the last meeting carried us over, and we have worked on one already.

*Akin:* Which one did you work on?

*Technician:* Number two. The streamlining of recording of results.... It wasn't a place where we could stop, it kinda built up, and we kinda took the ball and started doing some things in the lab.

*Akin:* It sounds like our process worked, although not exactly what I had in mind. Sounds OK to me. Let's go look to see what's going on.

At that point lab members take charge of the meeting and present what they have discussed and have already implemented. The video displays a changed group mood. Employees are smiling as they report the initiative they have taken in improving the lab's processes. One employee seems to take pleasure in having thrown Akin off stride by their initiative. The employees' improvement is not limited to the issues identified initially; they move on to suggestions for restructuring the physical layout of the lab. These employees have taken ownership of the intervention that Akin instigated and they have expanded the scope of improvements to include moving lab equipment.

The video demonstrates how appreciative inquiry can reframe employee perception of an organizational intervention from a management-driven exercise to an opportunity for employees to take charge of their work environment. Emphasizing the positive avoids defensiveness, bypasses the need to cover up weaknesses and mistakes when dealing with an outsider or authority figure, and bonds the work group into forward-looking, positive action in pursuit of a common mission and goals.

As a participant in an appreciative inquiry experience in Hampton, Virginia, expressed it, "It's easy being negative; being positive makes you want to work" (Johnson, 1999). Hammond (1996) states that appreciative inquiry involves describing the best of what is, then envisioning what might be, then dialoguing what should be, and finally, innovating what will be.<sup>4</sup> Appreciative inquiry emphasizes the posi-

tive and involves practitioners and scholars together in fishing rather than in studying dead fish. The videotape communicates more effectively than narrative the attitude among team members. The tape also records Akin's surprise and learning from the participants and the process. Appreciative inquiry, which puts practitioners in charge, offers scholars an opportunity to learn beyond the frame that they initially conceptualized.

Appreciative inquiry seems simple, yet the required reordering of our perceptual frame is difficult, particularly for managers who have a find-the-mistakes-and-fix-them mentality. Even as scholars, we have a problem orientation rather than an appreciation orientation. Problem-solving empowers us—the scholar or teacher; appreciation shares power with those outside our control.<sup>5</sup> Appreciative inquiry helps theorists to follow Weick's (1979, 261) injunction to complicate ourselves in order to comprehend a new reality. Complicate yourself in order to be able to comprehend the complexity of organizational life; then explain the complex reality simply through the telling of stories or by another artful device. In the aggregate simple and complex explanations by both scholars and practitioners should, as Lou Weschler (1998, 193) suggests, "enlighten the practice of democratic governance."

#### APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY IN THE CLASSROOM

Telling stories is good bait for getting students and practitioners excited about learning to fish. Appreciative inquiry draws them into the learning by demonstrating that communication will be two-way: the instructor wants students to learn and to participate in teaching. The instructor helps the learner build on his or her knowledge base by showing that the student has unique knowledge to share. Breaking the class into small groups creates a low-risk environment for learners to volunteer information. Assigning case problems that have no one right answer means that a variety of proposed actions can be effective and ineffective solutions, and the instructor can use the Socratic method to work through hidden assumptions or to tweak some faulty thinking to create a satisfactory response,

thereby providing positive reinforcement for a student answer.<sup>6</sup> Open-ended simulations and role-playing segments of a case offer collaboration, competition, and realistic fishing experiences for the experienced manager as well as the novice.

The risk-oriented teacher can try "classroom as organization" (Putzel, 1992). In this semester-long, highly structured yet chaotic learning environment, the class divides into groups that take on the roles necessary for managing and conducting the class such as planning, scheduling, directing, evaluating, recordkeeping, teaching, motivating, and maintaining morale and focus. For the first several weeks, students are disoriented. They have a complete set of instructions for what to do, but they have no frame of reference for how to behave, either within the group or between groups, and are unable to establish priority among their assigned tasks. Confusion gradually lifts, and a sense of being in control emerges, for the students truly are in charge of running a flat, highly participatory, unwieldy organization. Students benefit from affirmation and the challenge to communicate effectively in a nonhierarchical environment. Teachers benefit, too, as the classroom as organization allows the teacher to experience the excitement and anxiety of being the CEO of a participatory organization.

#### THE CHALLENGE FOR THE PERSON IN CHARGE

In both appreciative inquiry and storytelling, the teacher or consultant is giving up control. Storytelling empowers the listener to make sense of an ambiguous stimulus and perhaps side with the disfavored. Even in the morality tale of a tightly scripted Western, one can choose to identify with the Indians rather than the cowboys. For consultants, appreciative inquiry may run afoul of the contractor's desires. In the classroom, students may see empowerment as a chance to free ride rather than to engage the opportunity of the game. However, frequent feedback incorporating positive reinforcement, suggestions for improvement, and group evaluation, along with peer assessment, usually motivates the class. Rigorous assessment seems an undesirable option, because the primary purpose is not accumu-

lating information but learning how to work together in groups to meet challenges. Group presentations reveal whether it truly has been a group effort or whether discrete parts have been patched together.

This fishing approach to teaching is neither easier nor less risky, but it is more exciting than stand-and-deliver because every class session is an unpredictable adventure. With classroom as organization, mistakes are common and offer everyone the opportunity to indulge the current management mantra of forgiveness (Harvey, 1988). Practicing participatory management and risk-taking in the classroom models the organizational reality into which students will be thrust as employees, if they are fortunate.

#### COMMUNICATION, APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY, THEORY, AND PRACTICE

At the outset, we defined communication as what is received. If reception is faulty, check for comprehension and emotional blockage of the message. Stories send multiple and ambiguous meanings. If the purpose is precision, stories are not an appropriate medium. Use specific language and sequential instructions. However, for opening new possibilities, stories lead the learner along a path to revisualize the subject. Appreciative inquiry, building on previous achievement and positive reinforcement, dissolves defensiveness and self-protective inclinations. Stories team well with appreciative inquiry, motivating groups to stellar performance. In high-performing groups, theory and practice work together seamlessly.

#### CONCLUSION

Achieving mutually beneficial learning relationships is a challenge, and with increased task specialization the difficulties of bridging task boundaries are likely to mount. Pressures for high performance constitute a threatening environment. Appreciative inquiry and its associated data-gathering techniques lower situationally induced anxiety for practitioners, thereby increasing the validity of research and the usefulness of low-threat organizational development interventions. Stories and other art forms can open

scholars' minds to new realities, because both appreciative inquiry and various artistic expressions of reality speak not only to our brains but also to our emotions. Complicating ourselves helps us to see new realities and to consider alternative frames for our research.

The student/practitioner side of the gap can be narrowed by describing active fishing and finding media for our messages to present to classrooms and practitioners in ways that harmonize with practitioner learning styles. Most MPA students aspire to become great managers, not renowned scholars. For the teacher/scholar, listening to and watching active managers and students sharpens the scholar's theory and teaching. The result benefits scholar, student, teacher, and practitioner.

Dead fish in formalin may be needed for technical training and in some doctoral seminars, because not all teachers or students find their preferred learning style to be close contact with the potential high stress resulting from personal involvement in an unpredictable environment. Scholars can figure out individually what they are doing and how best to communicate reality to the audience—lecture, article, story, tape, dance, art, simulation, discussion, problem-solving, or some other method. Just as these alternative media help to communicate the complexity of the practitioner's task and to narrow the theory-practice gap, appreciative inquiry can open a new window for conceptualizing research projects, methods of data acquisition, teaching, and organizational improvement interventions.

#### NOTES

1. Some important skills cannot be communicated by stories. The skill of performing well at a city council budget session cannot be taught, even by stories. One must watch and practice regarding the nuances of what to say, to whom to say it, when to say it, and when to listen. Lou Weschler (1998) describes his unsuccessful attempt to tell someone how to fly-fish.
2. Representative readings on appreciative inquiry include the following: Cooperrider and Whitney (1999), Fry et al. (2002), Hammond (1996), Srivastva et al. (1990), and Watkins and Mohr (2001). In addition to the appreciative inquiry citations noted, see also Symon and Cassell (1998), Watkins and Mohr (2001), and Fry et al. (2002).
3. The videotape was sponsored by the Clinical Laboratory Management Association.

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4. For a listing of appreciative inquiry research, see the appreciative inquiry Web site, <http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/research/bibPublished.cfm>.
5. For elaboration of this required paradigm shift, see Gergen (1996) and Heron (1996).
6. The Case and Comments section of *Public Performance and Management Review*, in which a problematic case is followed by several possible answers offered by academics and practitioners, allows readers to compare their solutions to the recommendations by experts.

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