

# Using appreciative inquiry to explore the potential of enhanced practice education opportunities

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## Key words:

Appreciative inquiry,  
practice education.

This practice analysis demonstrates how appreciative inquiry has been used within a Local Health Board to enhance the quality of practice placements and increase the range of occupational therapy practice opportunities offered to students. A positively focused appreciative inquiry workshop, collaboratively facilitated between the Local Health Board and a university, brought about change. Both student placements and the range of placement opportunities increased, and occupational therapists and students reported greater confidence and improved experiences. The use of appreciative inquiry in discussion provided a guiding structure and a framework that enhanced and sustained positive change.

## Statement of context

Practice education placements can be positive and enlightening experiences for both practice educators and students. Despite this, they continue to be difficult to secure for pre-registration occupational therapy programmes, both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally (Thomas et al 2007). Much of the literature identifies barriers to facilitating student placements for healthcare professions (Pollard et al 2007, Sevenhuysen and Haines 2011), with only a small number acknowledging both the benefits and challenges faced (Davies et al 2011, Thomas et al 2007). Rather than using an approach that explored the barriers encountered in securing and facilitating placements, this practice analysis will investigate how adopting an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach with a group of practice educators may enable a positive and collaborative strategy to be developed between a Local Health Board (LHB) and university.

An initial audit was conducted in 2011 by the Practice Development Lead to establish the status of practice placements and to provide evidence to the Welsh Government on student activity within the LHB. A questionnaire was distributed to all registered occupational therapists and the data obtained were used to differentiate between those who had facilitated a placement and those who had not offered a placement for at least 1 year. The latter were the target for this group exercise (see Table 1).

As can be seen from Table 1, only 45 (45%) of the 100 available educators had made a placement offer during the year 2010/2011. An invitation to attend an AI workshop was extended to the 55 practitioners who had not made a placement offer. Due to workload pressures within the LHB, only 20 practitioners were able to attend, to explore how they would wish to be supported in the development of their role as practice educators. This was facilitated in small groups within the four phases of the AI cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny — see Fig. 1). Participants explored concerns and developed strategies to enhance their roles by focusing on positive solutions and ‘visions of the possible’ (Machon and Roberts 2010, p147). Cooperrider and Whitney (2005, p8) acknowledge that AI provides opportunities that

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**Table 1. Results of occupational therapy practice education audit**

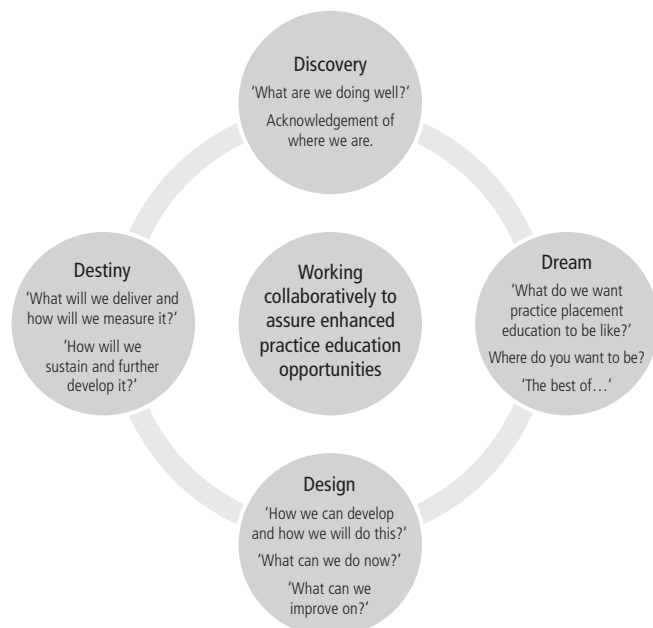
Number of occupational therapists in LHB	127
Audit questionnaires returned (3 practitioners on maternity leave)	124
Completion of post-registration practice education training (available educators)	100
Placement offers made available to the university	45
Available educators who made placement offers in the year April 2010 to end of March 2011 (n = 45)	45 (45%)
Available educators who had not made placement offers in the year April 2010 to end of March 2011 (n = 55)	55 (55%)

‘give way to imagination and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream and design.’

AI is a way of working to bring about change that focuses on ‘the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them’ (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, p8). Judy and Hammond (2006, p1) explain that AI ‘encourages groups to inquire about, learn from, and build on what is working when they are at their best, rather than focusing on what’s gone wrong and fixing problems.’

Appreciating what works well within a given situation or service provides a ‘starting point for creating positive and meaningful change, so that what we focus on becomes our reality’ (Atkin and Lawson 2006, p102). By using the four phases of the AI cycle (see Fig. 1), placement opportunities were explored and ideas generated for future service development.

Fig. 1. The Appreciative Inquiry cycle.



Adapted from Richer et al (2010) p167.

AI literature acknowledges that it can be difficult to see the positives in a situation when ‘the negative often seems more vivid and important’ (Reed 2007, p33). Adopting an AI approach to explore the potential for enhanced practice

**Table 2. Examples of questions used to facilitate discussion**

AI Phase	Prompt
Discovery	Why do we need to take students on practice placements?
	What are the benefits of facilitating student placements?
	How have you optimized student practice placements?
	Can you describe examples of current successful placements? How could your role as a placement educator be supported?
Dream	What would an ‘ideal’ scenario in relation to facilitating student placements?
	What further opportunities could be provided?
	What support mechanisms would be desirable?
	How could your experience of student education be integrated into current practice and professional development?
Design	How could you make your ideas work?
	What resources would you need?
	How could you implement future placements?
	How could you overcome possible barriers? How could you maximize the potential for placements in your clinical setting?
Destiny	How could successful placements be sustained?
	How could the process be developed?
	How could new educators be integrated into the process of student education?
	How could the momentum of the process be sustained? How could the value of student education be maximized and recognized within the LHB?

placements encourages consideration of what is the optimum current availability, in order to identify and appreciate the ‘root causes of success’ (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005, p26). This would allow best practice to be acknowledged and provide opportunities to identify and build on inner strengths (Reed 2007) within the context of practice education at LHB level. Prompts were used to support discussion at every phase of the AI cycle (see Table 2).

## Critical reflection on practice

### Discovery

In the initial Discovery phase, group participants in reflection explored examples of the success of current practice education within the LHB. The participants perceived the existence of a strong practice education relationship between the university and LHB. Some practice educators provided innovative approaches to practice education by using 2:1 models of supervision and sharing placements across service settings. The LHB acknowledged the strong links between student placement opportunities and positive recruitment. Rodger et al (2007) stated that the ‘provision of fieldwork opportunities provides organizations with powerful opportunities to recruit and employ the most suitable occupational therapists for arising vacancies’ (p94). Other positive issues identified included a mentorship scheme to support new practice educators and the value practice educators placed on student evaluation of their placements.

Rather than focusing on the negatives and the lack of potential for practice education within the LHB, taking an AI approach, considering things with a positive eye, enabled a number of examples of excellent practice to emerge. This provided a basis from which to consider the 'Dream' phase of the AI cycle by thinking about 'what might be' (Reed 2007, p33).

## Dream

Discussion in the Dream phase of the AI cycle provided further opportunities for examples of exceptional practice to be explored. Lewis and Van Tiem (2004) acknowledged that through focusing from 'this stand-point, individuals, groups and the organization can fully appreciate what has worked in the past and apply these successes to the present and the future' (p21). Having the opportunity to fully appreciate what worked well provided an excellent starting point from which to 'dream the dream' of enhanced practice education opportunities within the LHB and how this might be achieved.

Innovative thinking that focused on envisioning what might be (Reed, 2007) was encouraged, with the sharing of hopes and dreams (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) of what future practice education could look like. Acknowledging the aspirations of the participants, which initiated 'change in the organization by concretely doing more of what they do best' (Richer et al 2009, p949), was important in this process.

A number of creative suggestions emerged within this phase of the AI cycle. Aspirations of having enthusiastic practice educators and developing a community of educators who felt empowered and supported to facilitate placements, were strongly expressed. It was considered ideal if all practice educators were prepared for their role through achieving APPLE accreditation (COT 2008).

Another aspiration identified was the desire for all practice settings within the LHB to offer placement opportunities through innovative approaches such as 2:1 models of supervision and partnership working across service sectors. Participants also voiced the dream of being involved in the provision of quality placement experiences where links between theory and practice were clearly evident and related closely to the students' essential learning outcomes. Responses within the Dream phase, emerging from the initial phase of Discovery, concerned the value of the innovative examples of placement experiences currently being offered to students. Participants expressed the dream of developing these opportunities and cascading them within the LHB. This enabled further exploration of how practice placements could be facilitated in a wider variety of clinical settings, using an opportunities-focused approach instead of concentrating on perceived barriers.

Having considered what enhanced practice placement opportunities might look like, the next phase was to 'generate innovative ways to bring about the future envisioned' (Richer et al 2010, p167) through the Design phase.

## Design

The Design phase of the AI cycle involved participants working together to develop and plan for the future (Reed 2007),

through focusing on how the dream of securing more placement opportunities could be achieved, with practical steps to utilize partnership between educators, LHB, and the university.

A number of positive recommendations were made:

- All registered occupational therapists would engage in activities that promote a range of student education within the organization:
  - Facilitating student placements
  - Offering work experience opportunities
  - Offering education to students of other professions
- Support would enable registered occupational therapists in any clinical setting to engage in practice education

Potential barriers to facilitating student placements were discussed; solutions, such as making placement offers available that did not require access to a car, the use of alternative models of supervision, or engagement in long-arm supervision within role-emerging areas of practice, were identified. Positive examples of occupational therapy staff using student education to enrich service delivery were presented in order to provide evidence of how this could be achieved. An educator who co-facilitated the workshop described how joint supervision of two students served to reduce referral waiting lists by 3 months. Another design solution identified was that practitioners employed on a part-time basis could share in the education of students.

Participants also considered how they could be assisted within their educator roles to deliver assured and well-planned placement experiences. The LHB Practice Development Lead made a commitment that APPLE educator training would be made available to all potential educators and that an educator mentorship programme would be further developed to support educators who were new to work-based education or had lost confidence in their role.

Each occupational therapist was encouraged to create a personal plan that identified future development needs, with strategies to overcome barriers in facilitating placements. Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) describe this process as the conditions for success, which encouraged the design of structures and strategies to support positive ways of engaging in practice education. The Design phase allowed the participants to think about how they could contribute positively to the creation of the ideal scenario (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) in relation to placement opportunities, and empowered them to move forward and envisage future responsibilities that maximized the potential of placements in the Destiny phase.

## Destiny

In the Destiny phase, the emphasis of the discussion was on how changes could be sustained and what needed to be in place to support the continued growth and development of the educator role and the increased number of placement offers. Originally called the Delivery phase, Cooperrider and Whitney (2005) adapted the term to Destiny to better reflect the transformational power of this cycle within AI and the creation of continued dreams and aspirations.

A number of initiatives were discussed that could empower practitioners to feel supported and more confident in developing

and sustaining their educator role. One of the mechanisms considered was a standardized approach to student induction and supervision through the development of a student handbook that could be used across the LHB. This would contain information on staff and student responsibilities, a proforma to guide weekly formal supervision, and an evaluation tool for students to provide anonymous feedback at the end of placements. Occupational therapy teams in each clinical area were encouraged to develop a local information resource, reflecting current staff within the service and the nature of practice, so that students felt more informed about the clinical setting for placements. Anecdotal evidence from student evaluations has provided confirmation that they report a better understanding of the structure of their placement and view clinical supervision more positively when this information is made available.

A commitment was made by the LHB to further develop their mentorship scheme so that more experienced educators were available to offer guidance and support to less experienced colleagues in relation to student education. Another mechanism that contributed to maintaining the dream of enhancing placement opportunities was a firm commitment from the university to facilitate regular educator refresher training opportunities so that all educators within the LHB could address their individual training needs, thus promoting a positive learning environment for both educators and students.

## Summary

One of the main drivers for using the AI process was to recruit practice educators to take students within the LHB and to ensure that a breadth of placement experiences was offered, reflecting current occupational therapy practice within Wales. It was essential that the results of the AI process be explored and data collected to illustrate any differences in the number of placements and the range of practice settings made available. In order to evaluate changes, a repeat audit was designed to capture data relating to practice education from April 2011 to March 2012 (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Results of occupational therapy practice education from repeat audit**

Number of occupational therapists in LHB	144
Audit questionnaires returned (15 practitioners on sick/maternity leave)	129
Completion of post-registration practice education training (15 of whom were on sick/maternity leave)	99
Number in the process of achieving post-registration practice education training	7
Number of available educators	106
Placement opportunities made available to the university	61
Available educators who made placement offers in the year April 2011 to end of March 2012 (n = 61)	61 (57.54%)
Available educators who had not made placement offers in the year April 2011 to end of March 2012 (n = 45)	45 (42.46%)

Overall there was an uptake of over 57.54% (n = 61) of educators facilitating or offering a student placement over the 2011/2012 period, an increase of 12.54% (n = 16) on the previous year. This is a positive outcome, which could be attributed to the AI exercise.

### Key findings

- AI provides a valuable framework to facilitate change within organizations.
- Benefits of the workshop and subsequent action were evidenced by change in staff attitude and positive feedback from both students and practitioners.
- The project resulted in increased number and range of student placements offered by the LHB.

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