

# Chapter 34

## Evaluating TVET Programmes through Appreciative Inquiry

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### Introduction

In connecting TVET to sustainable development, one of the areas ripe for exploration is evaluation. In the field of evaluation, an approach that is still in its infancy is appreciative inquiry (AI), a relatively new assets-based approach derived from the field of organizational development. This chapter seeks to bridge both gaps by proposing the use of AI to evaluate TVET programmes.

AI is a practical philosophy and tool that highlights the best in individuals and organizations and encourages them to strive towards a more positive future. As an evaluative approach it offers a practical strategy for encouraging change based on two main theoretical bases, positive imagery and social constructivism (Preskill and Coghlan, 2003). It encompasses elements from such inclusive techniques as empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1994), participatory evaluation (Cousins and Earl, 1995) and advocacy evaluation (Greene, 1997), but it goes beyond these through its systematic data collection process and its call to focus on the most successful aspects of a group. It is in these two latter points where AI differs the most from traditional evaluations. The typical evaluation is deficit-based, focusing on the needs of a group and trying to come up with ways of addressing them. This is most evident through the data-collection interviews ('What are the main obstacles you face? What prevents you from doing your job well? How could you minimize these problems?'). Consequently, evaluations often fail to acknowledge the organization's positive aspects and run the risk of alienating the same people they seek to support, possibly leading to evaluations left fallow. Moreover, TVET evaluations have traditionally focused on a very specific set of outcomes (job placement, academic achievement, programme costs) at the expense of other important goals as those spelled out by sustainable development (such as social equity and environmental protection). In contrast, because of AI's highly participatory nature, because it focuses on the most affirming aspects of an organization and because

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it provides a larger vision towards the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental goals, it becomes a promising evaluation method to consider.

## Background on AI

AI started in the 1980s through to the pioneering work of David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva of Case Western Reserve University (USA) (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005; Srivastva and Cooperrider 1990; Watkins, 2001). As a doctoral student of organizational behaviour, Cooperrider was highly influenced by the power of positive thinking, which led him to conclude that

... on a collective basis [it] may well be the most prolific activity that individuals and organizations can engage in if their aim is to help bring to fruition a positive and humanly significant future. (1990, p. 93)

Cooperrider was also influenced by the life and work of Albert Schweitzer who practiced a form of biotheism that deemed all life to be sacred and interconnected (Schweitzer, 1955). This biotheism served as a foundational stone to justify a ‘reverence for life’, one of Schweitzer’s intellectual hallmarks that also undergirds AI. Thus, what started as an organizational development tool evolved over time into ‘a philosophy and orientation to change that can fundamentally reshape the practice of organizational learning, design, and development’ (Watkins, 2001, p. 21). Over the last two decades AI has been applied with great success to a variety of institutions worldwide, including Fortune 500 companies, religious organizations, schools and universities and community-based groups in developing countries.

The actual practice of AI generally follows a four-dimension cycle. In the first stage, *discovery*, group members narrate stories on previously selected affirmative topics. These stories come out of individual interviews that pose a variation of the following question: What was a peak experience or high point in your (personal/professional/organizational) life? For the storytelling to be effective, the questions should affirm individuals’ skills and focus on both technical capacity and community development. Once the interviews and stories take place, answers are shared with the group as a whole and common themes related to causes of success are identified.

In the second stage, *dream*, participants envision their organization working at its best. Based on the common strengths identified in the interviews and through various visualization and creativity-enhancing techniques, participants challenge the status quo, confront common assumptions and create a new reality in their minds. This stage is where sustainable development goals start to take shape. Typical questions are: what is your dream for a better world? How can your organization contribute to that dream? What unique contribution(s) can you make to that dream? The answers are then summarized in the form of macro-level provocative propositions, declarative and affirmative ‘statements that bridge the best of “what is” with your own speculation of intuition of “what might be”’ (Watkins, 2001, p. 141). A provocative proposition can be in the form of words – a single sentence, a mission

statement, a poem – or a drawing (more appropriate for non-literate groups). The most successful macro-level propositions are those that contain a holistic vision, an image shared by all and a balance between current accomplishments and future goals.

In the third stage, *design*, the macro picture is broken down into specific statements that address short-, medium- and long-term strategies. These statements are micro-level provocative propositions that detail a specific plan of action, with doable activities spread over time. The most successful action plans are those that address the following areas: (a) the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholder groups and individuals in those groups, (b) technical skills as well as ‘soft’ skills such as leadership and networking, (c) resources such as financial, human, material and so on and (d) structural components such as policies, management, documentation and monitoring.

In the fourth and final stage, *delivery*, the provocative propositions are brought to fruition. This stage emphasizes innovation through the mobilization of new ideas, material resources and personnel. It supports continuous learning so that members can learn from even the smallest of successes for future replication. It pushes for active participation and shared responsibility for decision-making. It stresses continuous evaluation to ensure adequate progress and to revise action plans when appropriate and it encourages an appreciative eye to celebrate the highlights of the organizational transformation. This latter point is a reminder of the cyclical nature of AI, which means that any stage can recur at any point during the transformational process.

Grounding the practice of AI are two main theoretical considerations: positive imagery and social constructionism. Regarding positive imagery, one key principle is (positive) heliotropism, a biological law that describes how plants move in the direction of the sun. A complementary principle is what Edward Wilson (1992) called biophilia, or ‘the connections that humans subconsciously seek with the rest of life’ (p. 350). While it is still being debated whether it is subconscious or not, biophilia nonetheless describes the human propensity to affiliate with and care for other life forms, human and nonhuman alike. Two well-known illustrations from medicine and education explain this (for other examples, see Cooperrider, 1990).

One comes from the placebo effect, that is, when an inactive substance or procedure used as a control in an experiment is found to be as effective as the active substance or procedure. Numerous carefully controlled experiments have shown that a placebo action can provide relief or the diminution of pain (Evans, 2004). This relief has not only been self-reported but has also been objectively measured and the same improvements have not been typically observed in patients not receiving the placebo. While thought alone cannot cure all diseases, the research has consistently indicated that positive images can be projected into the future to accelerate or even activate the emotional and physiological healing process, even when the patient is receiving no active inducement.

A second example comes from the Pygmalion effect, in which a false analysis of a situation leads one to think and behave in such a way that the original false analysis becomes true. In the classic 1968 Pygmalion study by Jacob Rosenthal

and Lenore Jacobson, a group of children from the 1st to the 6th grade received an IQ test (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1992). The students were then divided randomly and a false list of the allegedly top scorers was given to the teachers. At the end of the school year, the IQ test was given again and the scores from the two tests compared. Rosenthal and Jacobson found that, in general, those students who had been falsely labelled as being superior had scored significantly higher than those labelled as average.

In these two illustrations there is the element of anticipatory images of the future. This anticipation inspires and guides the behaviour of individuals. It is the image projected into the future that determines how people operate. Inevitably, this will have an effect on the social systems these individuals belong to, both in a positive and negative manner.

In addition to positive imagery, the second theoretical consideration that grounds AI is social constructionism. As originally theorized by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967), social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that seeks to understand the ways in which individuals and collectivities make sense of perceived reality. It is concerned with people's shared understanding of the world in the past, present, and future. This shared understanding emerges and is reproduced by social interactions that presuppose a common set of assumptions and knowledge. One typical example is the social construct of gender. The rules by which women behave in certain ways – as evidenced by clothing, speech, employment, leisure activities and so on – is wholly or mostly determined by historical and social processes, regardless of biology.

Kenneth Gergen (2001), a key proponent of the connections between social constructionism and AI, posited that the basic unit of knowledge is not the individual but the relationship among people. This opens up the possibility of going from *cogito ergo sum*, a key tenet of Western modern thought, to *communicamus ergo sum*. In this context, language becomes the main tool by which we establish such communication and vocabularies of understanding change through interaction, negotiation, conflict and consensus building. As we shall see below, the construction of reality as mediated by language has important implications for evaluation theory and practice as stakeholders with diverse viewpoints are present at the same table.

## Connecting AI to Evaluation

To best understand the relationship between AI and evaluation, I use a hypothetical example from a vocational education programme based on a public secondary school, supplemented by real AIs. The programme in question trains students in the design and construction of houses for low-income families through a partnership with Habitat for Humanity. The houses are built on school grounds but, upon completion, they are moved to their permanent site. To evaluate the programme's progress, AI is selected because while in general there have been noteworthy results – namely, the construction of one house a year – there is one area of concern,

the minimal involvement of environmental considerations in the home design and construction. After conducting an initial workshop in which the main principles of AI are introduced, the first step is to engage with the teachers (and later on with the students) in the *discovery* stage; the dimension that acknowledges and celebrates everything that has been accomplished to date. The questions can be made more general or more specific depending on the needs of intended users. The interviews, conducted by an external appreciative evaluator or by the teachers themselves, could encompass the following questions:

- Reflect for a moment in your involvement with the house design and construction programme over the last three years. Now describe high points that made you especially proud. Who was involved? What made that experience possible?
- In your work at the programme, what do you value the most in yourself as a contributing member?
- Describe a positive experience you have had related to design and construction that has sought to minimize its ecological footprint?
- If you had three wishes that would allow you to extend the environmental considerations of your programme, what would those be?
- Imagine it is the year 2012 and your programme has been awarded the Green Architecture award of the year. What is happening in the programme that allowed it to earn such a prize?

The power of appreciative questions should not be underestimated. As Jacobsgaard (2004) said about an appreciative evaluation of a Sri Lankan non-governmental organization (NGO) supporting victims of trauma, when they were initially approached to be evaluated through AI, the NGO members were reluctant to comply, because previous evaluations had mostly focused on the negative aspects of the programme and neglected the positive ones. When AI was introduced, members of the Sri Lankan staff were surprised by the high level of energy generated in comparison to previous evaluations. To a question such as, ‘Tell us about a situation when you [the NGO] have been most successful in [the] prevention of torture and violence?’ (Jacobsgaard, 2004, p. 58), answers showed how creative the group had been in protecting victims, despite working under extremely onerous conditions.

From this experience and that of other groups using AI, the storytelling of peak experiences, a basic AI data gathering tool, has been found to be ideal for creating the momentum necessary for change. Unlike traditional evaluation techniques that consider the participants separate from the data, in AI the participants, the data collection process and the data itself are viewed as inseparable. Storytelling is a universal activity that involves mind, body and spirit in ways that traditional analytic discussions fail to bring together. The content of the story itself engages the intellect, but then the images evoke a much deeper level of understanding and feeling. It awakens ‘the dreaming imagination and intuitive intelligence of the listener’ (Watkins, 2001, p. 77), which are essential for helping participants to create new visions of their world.

This leads us to the *dream* stage, which starts the goal driven, action-oriented function of AI. Part of the power of AI is that it encourages participants to defy the

status quo by envisioning a more inspiring and ambitious programme. AI provides a holistic direction for a more humane and efficient organization and, ultimately a more peaceful and harmonious world. As Cooperrider wrote:

AI is based on a 'reverence for life' and is essentially biocentric in character: It is an inquiry process that tries to apprehend the factors that give life to a living system and seeks to articulate those possibilities that can lead to a better future. (1990, p. 121)

Choosing the right dream, one that is doable but that challenges current practices, is the stage that requires the most creativity. Its starting point is the information collected in the discovery stage, and is organized into macro-level provocative propositions. In the hypothetical case mentioned above, teachers and design and construction consultants could come up with an architectural project that, for instance:

- Follows traditional home designs to respect local architectural traditions;
- Employs passive and active solar designs for energy conservation;
- Uses as far as possible electricity that has been generated on-site (e.g., in solar panels);
- Fosters the use of materials grown locally and/or sustainably;
- Uses wastewater for irrigation purposes;
- Creates a landscape that uses native plants and that promotes biological diversity;
- Integrates design and construction systems to avoid redundancies (Orr, 2002).

While the final list will depend on many local considerations, such as finances, know-how and human resources, the point is to build houses that both the school and future occupants can feel proud of, because they please aesthetically, reduce long-term costs and cause the minimal possible ecological damage.

In the *design* stage, the values and ideals from the dream stage are given specificity. In this stage participants are addressing the what, the who, the how and the when of the evaluation. This includes crafting a new set of responsibilities, roles and relationships among stakeholders. Here, both quantitative and qualitative data can be collected. For our specific example, some of the changes may include:

- Having teachers receive training in green architecture;
- Attending regular workshops and conferences to keep up to date;
- Making necessary curricular additions and changes;
- Establishing partnerships with local environmental and architectural agencies that can assist the school in realizing its vision;
- Communicating with other key actors (such as school administrators and parents) about the importance of the changes to secure their support;
- Writing grants to help fund the needed changes.

In this stage, as in the dream one, the role of language is essential in shaping people's perception of the world. As George Lakoff wrote, 'thinking differently requires speaking differently' (2004, p. xv). A good example is the concept 'employment creation', considered a key goal of vocational education. This concept masks more than it reveals. While programme administrators and evaluators may give positive

marks to a programme in which its students secure employment upon graduation, the jobs may be ones that alienate the individual or that hurt others and the planet. Thus, we are forced to qualify this term with an adjective like ‘quality’ employment or ‘dignified’ employment, to signify the push for a new social reality. In a similar vein, language use reflects power differences among stakeholder groups. Those who hold power and who speak the standard (and more prestigious) version of the vernacular end up defining the problems at the expense of the input from marginal groups. For instance, vocational education students are often labelled ‘at risk’ in the context of US schools and seldom is the effect of this label assessed on the youth’s self identity. As Madison (2000), who studied the socio-politics of language in social programmes, wrote:

For the youth, the language of at-risk conjures up feelings of anxiety and shame. This shame is internalised by some of these youngsters. For some youth, at-risk meant that they are defective in some way. Others stated that ‘people think we are losers and have little potential in life’. (p. 23)

Linguistic mental structures, which Lakoff (2004) called ‘frames’, thus shape an organization’s provocative propositions. They help to determine what social policies are possible, or even conceivable. The role of the appreciative evaluator then is to help use language to create alternative, positive views of reality.

The last stage is *delivery*, which turns the macro and micro propositions from the dream and design stages into a physical reality. This is the longest lasting stage and one that requires continuous learning and innovation. Although the changes may require a new structural and social architecture, the likelihood of implementing AI action plans is high for two main reasons. Firstly, the images of the future are grounded in the organization’s positive past. Following the principle of heliotropism, people tend to follow positive rather than negative reinforcement more readily, at least when organizations are viewed as families; that is, where respect, high expectations and care abound. Secondly, there is a sense of ownership of the evaluation. As in other participatory forms of evaluation, members focus the questions, come up with the vision, establish priorities, interpret the data and connect processes to outcomes (Cousins and Earl, 1995). Participation is real, not fictitious. Following the tenets of social constructionism about how images create realities, this is especially important when there are divergent views and the evaluator helps them to coalesce into a vision that all or most individuals can agree with.

It should be noted that AI makes most sense as a formative evaluation strategy as opposed to a summative one. People’s vision for a better organization will necessarily evolve over time, so there is no single end point but a multiplicity of them. This idea also honours the cyclical nature of AI because the stages can repeat themselves at any moment during the process. In our hypothetical example of the vocational programme, the main actors created a vision that leads them to 2012, and seek to bring about and consolidate those changes in the delivery stage. Ideally, every few years a new evaluation should be conducted to calibrate the original goals and to determine if new ones are needed. In a similar fashion, interventions that have included post-evaluation follow-ups have ascertained the usefulness of AI. Two



years after an appreciative evaluation was done at the African Women's Media Centre (AWMC) based in Dakar, Senegal, a follow up took place to determine if some of the originally identified challenges had been addressed (Catsambas and Webb, 2003; for other examples, see Preskill and Coghlan, 2003). One of the problems the group had initially identified was the lack of African leadership in the organization. The AWMC was funded by an international NGO with headquarters in Washington, DC. Thanks to the AI evaluation vital changes occurred, as AWMC leaders said:

Since the [AI] evaluation took place, we have made some dramatic changes in the leadership of the NGO. At the time of the evaluation AWMC had an American director ... since the evaluation a new director has been hired – a journalist from The Gambia with 25 years of experience in radio and a background in leading NGOs in Africa. (Catsambas and Webb, 2003, p. 48)

This example points to the issue of sustainability and the changes that AI can effect on evaluation procedures long after AI evaluators have left. AWMC's post-evaluation revealed that the staff were actively incorporating AI elements in their own evaluations. For instance, they now asked questions differently from they way they did in the past, with a focus towards celebrating and learning from past successes, and developed a greater long-term vision than previously contemplated. Similar experiences have been documented by other evaluations using AI (e.g., Jacobsgaard, 2004).

## Potential Problems of AI in Evaluation

There are three main potential problems related to the philosophical and practical foundations of AI:

- Detractors have found weaknesses in AI's support for positive imagery. For instance, it has been argued that the medical evidence backing the placebo effect – used in support for positive imagery – is mixed at best (Patton, 2003). For instance, after reviewing the evidence, Kienle and Kiene (1997) concluded that factors such as spontaneous improvement, fluctuation of symptoms, regression to the mean, additional treatment and patient expectation could be more significant. Evans (2004), however, conducted a large-scale analysis of placebo studies dating back to the 1950s and found that in general it is safe to say that the placebo effect is real, but small.

A similar critique has been made of Pygmalion effect-like research. Wineburg (1987) argued that from a statistical standpoint the effect sizes of studies on self-fulfilling prophecies have been small and the correlations weak, and there is a danger of blaming teachers for problems that should be better attributed to such societal problems as poverty and racism. Nonetheless, recent meta-analysis showed that the Pygmalion effect does exist (although the effect is typically small) and it tends to affect more markedly stigmatized social groups (Jussim and Harber, 2005). In sum, while the evidence in support of the placebo and Pygmalion effect is not conclusive, there is enough confirmation to show



that people's beliefs about something, or how others view them, do affect their behaviour and their belief in their own capacity to accomplish a desired outcome.

- AI has also been faulted for its lack of objectivity. Because it asks loaded (positive) questions, it has been critiqued as being biased and lacking neutrality. As Patton wrote:

[AI] may even, ironically, discourage inquiry by discouraging constructive criticism. The focus on appreciation can imply an unwillingness to look at weaknesses, problems, and things that can go wrong. (2003, p. 91)

While this is certainly possible, the wishes and dreams that come out of the appreciative questions implicitly point to deficiencies in the organization. In the evaluation of Senegal's AWMC, a wish that had been manifested was an increase in African leadership, clearly indicating a weakness in the organization. In our hypothetical example, the fact that the evaluation was being conducted in the first place with a focus on environmental sustainability, was precisely due to the willingness of stakeholders to confront their current desires. It should also be emphasized that the owners of the evaluation, the actual intended users, are the ones to decide what makes most sense, given their own values and goals.

As long as stakeholders are aware of the partiality of appreciative questions and find it unproblematic – because they are assuming honesty in the data collection – then this should not constitute an obstacle to ensuring that the findings are relevant and ultimately used. As Patton wrote in his defence of utilization-focused evaluation, 'commitment to intended use by intended users should be the driving force in an evaluation' (1997, p. 382). A different but relevant view is the one presented by Jennifer Greene in her advocacy of evaluators explicitly stating their value commitments. She wrote:

It is time for evaluators to claim and proclaim their advocacy. To do otherwise is to be disingenuous, even deceptive to our audiences. It is to don a mantle of impartiality that is today tattered and threadbare, that no longer shields our inquirer selves from the prejudicial influences of values and beliefs. (1997, p. 28)

Even when so-called 'objective' evaluations are done (such as those related to needs assessments), the likelihood of uncovering positive aspects is much less certain than the likelihood of AI of uncovering negative aspects. So, for intended users who wish to use AI for a comprehensive picture of their organization, the balance weighs more heavily on AI's side.

- The final problem, related to the previous issue, focuses on the potential for the abuse of power. Because of differential control and influence in an organization, the more powerful individuals will tend to decide the evaluation agenda. They are less likely to choose topics that shed a negative light on their work. Moreover, the positive focus of AI may lead stakeholders to not want to rock the boat, and instead try to foster harmonious relationships in the hopes that a non-confrontational style addresses such thorny problems as poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia and so on. This point was emphasized by Rogers and Fraser (2004, p. 77) when they wrote, '[AI] runs the very real risk of papering over substantive

problems and in fact colluding with the powerful people who want the unexamined to remain so.'

This critique is coupled with another one concerning a main tenet of social constructionism, the idea that perception creates social reality. This view is disputed by the philosophical camp of realism. John Searle, one of realism's most eloquent defenders (1995), wrote that the physical reality does put limits on the socially constructed reality and that, ultimately, the existence of an objective reality should not be made irrelevant. Thus, if a female student in a vocational programme is prevented from engaging in certain activities just because of her gender, her change of perception will not in itself do away with the sexism.

In addressing these critiques, Gergen has sought to find common ground between realism and social constructivism in viewing both as 'cultural resources' (2001, p. 15) to be used in the appropriate context. We can choose to identify an objective reality in cases where there is oppression, and we can choose to challenge it by envisioning a new social reality that lacks that form of oppression. That is precisely what some case studies have revealed. MYRADA is a south Indian development organization that has used AI to promote sustainable development in rural Indian communities (Ashford and Patkar, 2001). MYRADA has worked with about 500 community groups in forest and natural resource management, watershed development, poverty alleviation and gender equity. On one occasion when AI's discovery stage was being conducted in one of the villages, women participants told uplifting stories of how they felt empowered to confront their husbands for the abusive gambling that kept their families poor (2001, p. 14). AI then assisted in solidifying these social gains at the local level. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that this worked because the rural community had already identified mistreatment of women as a problem. Without this earlier identification, it is unclear that AI would have uncovered the problem. This, however, is true not only of AI but of other forms of evaluation as well.

In sum, to ensure that the above three potential problems remain only potential, the AI evaluation requires time, trust, honesty and a new disposition from the part of stakeholders to embrace change.

## Conclusions

AI, as an evaluation philosophy and tool, is based on the alluring premise that by concentrating on the positive aspects of an organization, more favourable outcomes will be experienced. For sustainable development, AI is particularly tempting because both promote similar goals and strive to inject hope and optimism in forging a better future. For a low status field like TVET that has historically suffered from an ill-deserved reputation as the poor sister of general, academic education, AI presents itself as especially useful in lifting up TVET's self-esteem and directing its mission towards new, daring and powerful directions.

At the same time, one should be wary of the universal application of AI in all circumstances that call for an evaluation. We can see this in the concept of heliotropism, a favourite metaphor used by AI supporters. While the metaphor is highly inspiring, not all plants engage in positive heliotropism and those that do still have parts that behave in heliotropic negative ways – that is, they avoid the sun altogether, such as the roots. Similarly, AI is most useful for only some organizations, especially those that see evaluation as a learning process and those that have been hurt in the past by deficit-based evaluations, and even then AI may be used in combination with other evaluative tools – in a manner akin to combining qualitative and quantitative evaluations. Ultimately, as Patton reminded us, the merit and worth of an evaluation is determined by the organization’s renewal that results from the actual use of the evaluation’s processes and results (1997). If the transformation is positive, then the AI will have been effective. Otherwise, it will have failed.

Even with this admonition, we should remind ourselves that traditional TVET evaluations focus mostly on judging outcomes such as increasing academic achievement, graduation rates and employability. While these are certainly important goals, evaluations should also encourage stakeholders to embrace more ambitious aims, such as those suggested by sustainable development. In fact, any evaluation, be it AI or some other approach, has a responsibility to push the dialogue and action towards such goals as providing decent and cost-effective housing, safe and adequate food supply, fair and dignified employment, and protecting nature for present and future generations, all appropriate themes for TVET programmes. This entails the idea that one cannot engage in evaluations without becoming contaminated by personal or political sympathies, which should not preclude the candid and precise collection of data in the first three AI stages. In the context of research, but extrapolated here to evaluation, Howard Becker wrote, ‘The question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side are we on’ (1967, p. 239). By taking sides on the life-giving energy of people and organizations, AI is explicit in its value stance. AI’s conscious focus on positive emotions, such as cheerfulness, confidence, high expectations, love and faith may enable the visions of individuals and organizations a greater likelihood of becoming a reality.

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