

Positive emotion in workplace impact

The case of a work-based learning project utilising appreciative inquiry

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role of positive emotions in generating workplace impacts and examine it through the application of an adapted appreciative inquiry process in the context of a work-based project aimed at promoting integrated working under challenging organisational circumstances.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper adopts a case study methodology which highlights how an organisation facing difficult circumstances (such as austerity measures, siloed cultures, constant threats of reorganisation, and requirement to work across occupational boundaries) adapted an appreciative inquiry intervention/method.

Findings – This paper found, first, that the utilisation of appreciative inquiry in the context of an adapted work-based project in difficult organisational circumstances generated positive emotions manifest through a compelling vision and action plans, second, that the impacts (such as a vision) can become entangled and therefore part of the wider ecological context which promotes pathways to such impact, but that, third, there are a various cultural and climate features which may limit the implementation of actions or the continuation of psychological states beyond the time-bound nature of the work-based project.

Practical implications – The paper illustrates how an organisation adapted a form of appreciative inquiry to facilitate organisational change and generated outcomes which were meaningful to the various occupational groupings involved.

Originality/value – This paper offers new evidence and insight into the adaptation of appreciative inquiry under challenging circumstances in the context of a work-based learning project. It also provides a richer picture of how positive emotion can manifest in ways which are meaningful to a localised context.

Keywords Work-based learning, Emotion, Positive psychology, Positive emotion, Appreciative inquiry

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is now extensive evidence of the beneficial impacts of positive emotion at the personal, organisational, and societal levels (Quoidbach *et al.*, 2015), and more specifically to the workplace, impacts including well-being and broader health, job satisfaction, and personal and organisational resilience (Quoidbach *et al.*, 2015). In terms of pathways to such impacts, there is increasing evidence of its generative role with respect to learning and knowledge to create

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these impacts in the workplace (Gander *et al.*, 2016). It seems that positive emotions create safe workplaces spaces to explore values, meaning, accomplishment, and vision where personal and organisational transformation can happen. However, rather than such an asset view which focusses on what is present and on vision (i.e. something to create) (Wall, 2015, 2016b), the families of approaches used to explore work-based learning and work place change tend to rely on a deficit model of the world, which focusses on problems, issues, and discomforts (Wall, 2014).

An exception to this that has emerged is appreciative inquiry, a positive, strengths-based methodology, and research echoes the broader findings into the pathways to impacts above. However, there are ongoing concerns of the extent to which focussing on the positive can deliver deeper transformations. This is important in the context of work-based change methodologies, as work-based students will invariably need to apply it in the context and constraints of a work-based learning project and adapt it within their own specific personal and organisational contexts. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the role of positive emotions in generating workplace impacts, and then to examine a particular implementation of appreciative inquiry as part of a work-based learning and change project. The overall intention is to prompt further consideration, deployment, and examination of positive emotion broadly, and appreciative inquiry more specifically, in the context of work-based change methodologies.

This paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses the contemporary empirical evidence in relation to the role of positive emotion in relation to impacts in the workplace. This emphasises the important role of positive emotions in relation to change, learning, and knowledge generation at work, and the specific intervention/method of appreciative inquiry to exemplify such evidence. The second section then outlines the methodology of this paper, that is, a case-based approach to a manager designing a bespoke appreciative inquiry intervention. The paper adopts a case study methodology which highlights how a student (manager) in an organisation facing difficult circumstances adopted an appreciative inquiry process in a work-based learning project.

The case study is then presented in the following section, which outlines the details of the manager's intervention and its impacts. The specific application of the appreciative inquiry was framed as a way of exploring the perceptions, enablers and barriers to integrated working across the different areas of practice within the organisation. The ultimate aim was to enhance integrated working practices. The paper then moves on to discuss links between the study and contemporary knowledge and concludes with key insights and implications. The paper found that the utilisation of work-based project involving appreciative inquiry in the context of difficult organisational change did generate positive emotions and action, in line with contemporary evidence of the relationship between positive emotion and impact generally (Mills *et al.*, 2013), and appreciative inquiry more specifically (Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015). This paper therefore contributes new evidence into how appreciative inquiry processes can be adapted in the context of a work-based learning project, and under challenging organisational circumstances.

Pathways to impact in workplaces: positive emotion and appreciative inquiry

Positive emotion and workplace impacts

The role of positive emotion has been extensively explored across disciplines, settings and conceptual areas including positive orientations (Alessandri *et al.*, 2012), psychological capital (Newman *et al.*, 2014), and thriving at work (Paterson *et al.*, 2014). Within the specific context of workplaces, there has been a growing trend to research positive constructs such as hope, happiness, psychological and organisational resilience, work engagement, and appreciative inquiry (Mills *et al.*, 2013). Research has linked these constructs to outcomes such as job performance, organisational citizenship behaviours, and happiness (Szczygiela and Mikolajczak, 2017). As Quoidbach *et al.* (2015, p. 655) argue:

There is now strong evidence that positive emotions are worth cultivating, not only as ends in themselves but also as a means of achieving success and psychological growth, improved mental and physical health, more satisfying and lasting social and marital relationships, and even more societal changes.

In terms of learning and emotion in workplaces, evidence indicates that when people are more emotionally (and positively) engaged, workplace learning is more effective (Hazelton, 2014; Taylor and Statler, 2014). Gander *et al.* (2016, p. 1), for example, found that workplace activity which were designed to evoke positive experiences such as pleasure, meaning and accomplishment were effective in generating subjective and physical well-being at work. Here, it is suggested that positive emotion intensifies collaboration, help-seeking and help-giving behaviours, and even sensory-motor connectivity in knowledge creation (Aarrestad *et al.*, 2015).

Emotion and workplace learning have been conceptualised as being deeply intertwined factors that mutually and dynamically inform each other (Simpson and Marshall, 2010; Benozzo and Colley, 2012; Paterson *et al.*, 2014; Hodgins and Dadich, 2017). Indeed, as Steigenberger (2015) argues, emotions are not just states which stimulate or dampen processes of knowledge, but they also shape sensemaking and the specific cognitive content of situations. For example, it is argued that emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, or hope can shape the “content and motivational strength of sense-making accounts, influence the likelihood that a person will engage in sense-giving activities” (Steigenberger, 2015, p. 432).

However, this conception of emotion and learning goes beyond a simplistic positive/good-negative/bad dichotomy which masks the differential effects of discrete emotions. Indeed, even pride, interest, and gratitude have been found to have differential effects in terms of the outcomes identified above (Kuby, 2014; Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2014; Hu and Kaplan, 2015; Methot *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, research indicates that negative emotions during a task conflict can also generate positive emotions and outcomes (Tsai and Bendersky, 2015; O’Neill and McLarnon, 2017). This points to the more nuanced framework proposed by Todorova *et al.* (2014) who argue that positive-negative emotions are not a singular continuum, but rather two separate, orthogonal dimensions (i.e. more akin to an x and y axis). Here, they argue, negative emotion conflict can lead to additional information which can enable people to “feel more active, energized, interested, and excited, and these positive active emotions increase job satisfaction” (Todorova *et al.*, 2014, p. 451).

In addition, the realised effects of emotion have also been found to differ amongst individuals, with different levels of susceptibility to positive emotion (Liang and Chi, 2013), or the cultural and political context in which emotion is expressed (Benozzo and Colley, 2012). For example, emotions can be interpreted and manifest in variable ways through social structures, such as class, gender and race, and have been found to have active roles in facilitating and indeed “blocking” workplace learning (Benozzo and Colley, 2012, and also see Wall and Tran, 2015, 2016; Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017; Pradhan *et al.*, 2017). This aligns with the idea that the contextual and time-bound nature of how emotional responses arise, are interpreted, and turned in to action across different contexts with different rules (Fink and Yolles, 2015; Thompson and Willmott, 2016).

Positive emotion through work-based methodologies

There are many different “families” of work-based learning and change working (Wall, 2013, 2014, 2016c). They can include work-based learning with various degrees of negotiation (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Raelin, 2008), reflective and critically reflective practices (Helyer, 2015; Wall, 2017a, 2018), action research (Gearty *et al.*, 2015), action learning (Trehan and Rigg, 2015), and other approaches which combine aspects or processes of these such as action inquiry (Torbert, 2004), synergic inquiry (e.g. Tang and Joiner, 2006), and work applied learning (Abraham, 2012). Most, if not all, of these families are conceptualised as focussing on problems, problem solving, challenge, tension, dilemma, dichotomy, power struggles, or other uncomfortable feeling (Wall, 2014, 2016a, c).

There are consequences of conceptualising organisational change in this way (Wall and Perrin, 2015). As Lewis *et al.* (2011) assert, if organisational function is described as a well-oiled machine, when something is seen as not working, the method to fixing the problem lies with its identification of the issue and the method to resolve it. This approach can work well when there is a known outcome to the problem, with a skilled motivated team for its implementation. However, this logic is based on the assumption that the resolution of organisational issues is linear, a function of solving how to get from A to B, perhaps not taking into consideration the entangled nature of humans, values and beliefs in organisational life (Wall and Knights, 2013).

An alternative is conceptualising the world in more complex, dynamic, and humanistic ways (Wall and Rossetti, 2013; Wall, 2015; Wall and Jarvis, 2015; Wall *et al.*, 2016; Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017). A specific approach to work- or community-based learning which adopts such a perspective is appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2008; Lewis *et al.*, 2011; Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015). Appreciative inquiry assumes a stance which focusses on positive emotion to mobilise collective energy and action towards a more desired, future state. There are a variety of conceptualisations of appreciative inquiry, but one of the most popular is the 4D “cycle” (see Figure 1). Although the depiction of “Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny” as a cycle is common, appreciative inquiry was originally derived as a flexible conceptualisation of the positive core of organisations (Cooperrider *et al.* 2008).

Since the inception of appreciative inquiry in the 1980s, evidence continues to suggest that it is a more generative form of inquiry than problem solving (Calabrese *et al.*, 2013; Harmon, 2013; Bushe and Paranjpey, 2015; Sharp *et al.*, 2017). For example, Calabrese *et al.* (2013)

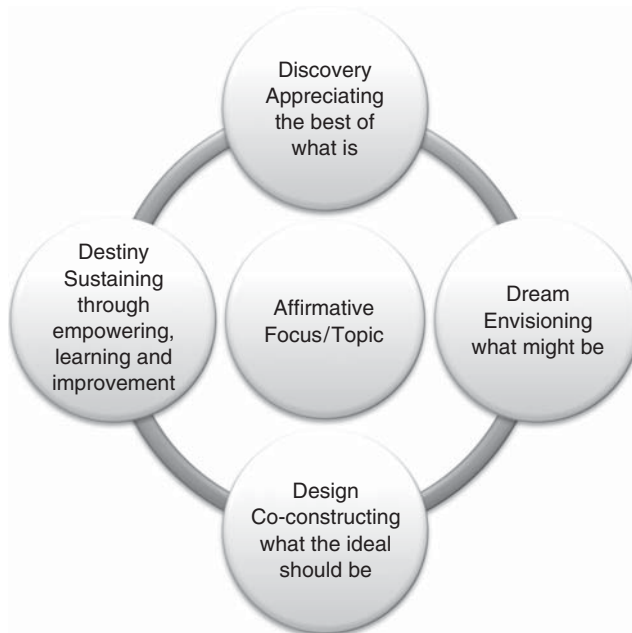


Figure 1.
Aspects of
appreciative inquiry

Sources: Adapted from Cooperrider *et al.* (2008), Trajkovski *et al.* (2013), Watkins *et al.* (2016)

found that through appreciative inquiry, participants developed a new and compelling vision, a stronger sense of empowerment, and clear action plans to achieve their goals. Similarly, Harmon (2013) found evidence of managers building and gaining trust within their organisations. For Sharp *et al.* (2017), the appreciative perspective invokes the motivational curiosity which encourages collaborative change efforts because it creates a safe space to reflect and explore values without judgement.

However, others criticise appreciative inquiry for its perceived inability to transform deeper structures and claim that practitioners have a preoccupation with “positivity” which inhibits appreciative inquiry’s ability to develop generative theory (Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015, p. 1579). These barriers censor certain content and emotions and are described by Fitzgerald *et al.* (2010) as the “shadow side” of appreciative inquiry. Such elements have the potential to suppress and stifle deeper appreciation and critical inquiry processes which enable people to “deconstruct experience and then engage critical appreciative processes during the remainder of the appreciative inquiry cycle to construct new experiences” (Ridley-Duff and Duncan, 2015, p. 1579).

Drawing this discussion together, there is now ample evidence about the role positive emotion has in creating a wide variety of impacts within the workplace. The pathways to these impacts include creating a safe space for people to express and explore values, meaning, accomplishments, vision, and the actions to be able to deliver them. These pathways to impact are echoed in the research into appreciative inquiry, one of the few work-based change methodological approaches which focus on a positive, or asset-/strengths-based approach. At the same time, questions remain as to the deeper critical processes of positive or appreciative frames to facilitate deeper levels of change and transformation. Therefore, it is unclear how impacts might unfold (if at all) in the context of work-based learning projects, where the student (manager) may be politically constrained in many and multiple ways to deliver the impacts. As the student (manager) may also need to adapt their application of appreciative inquiry to meet their specific study and organisational contexts and aims, it is also unclear how this might manifest pathways to organisational impact.

Methodology

This paper adopts a case approach to document and examine a work-based learning project utilising an adapted appreciative inquiry approach aimed at investigating and supporting integrated working within an organisation. Key features of the organisation’s context include the imposition of extensive austerity measures, siloed cultures, constant threats of reorganisation, and a requirement to work across occupational boundaries (more about this is detailed below). Although the organisational change described in this case involved 500 staff, the data for this paper were drawn from an initial pilot study. Methodologically, the study adopted a theoretical sampling frame (Stokes and Wall, 2014), focussing on the aspects deemed to be important to the overall theme of the study. Specifically, this was to explore the use of appreciative inquiry within the context of a work-based learning programme, and, on a more specific level, to explore the experiences of a diverse set of occupational managers engaged in and responsible for integrated working. This meant that the sampling frame was to include participants who had influence over different organisational units within the new structure, and represented all of organisational units from the central management team.

Managers across the organisation were invited to participate through the researcher’s internal networks, management team meetings, and through e-mail and informal conversations. Ten managers agreed to participate, and included a strategic manager, a manager from information and learning resources, a manager from the gym, an operational manager, a manager from the information technology operations, and a manager from the healthy lifestyles team. Together, these covered all sections on the site.

Each manager signed an informed consent before participating in the sessions. The organisation and managers are anonymised in this paper. More details about the case study context, appreciative inquiry intervention/method, and the findings, are now discussed in detail.

Case study: a work-based project using appreciative inquiry

Context

The context of this study was a manager (researcher) adopting the role of a practitioner researcher by undertaking a work-based learning project as part of a master's programme. Her aim was to respond sensitively to the increasing demands and challenges placed on the organisation in which she worked. As a response to severe political austerity at central and local government levels, the organisation had recently moved from public ownership, where the organisation was organised in to clear functional areas and operational units, to a business model requiring the staff of 500 to work in a much more integrated way and for-profit. This shift was from the security and stability of a national health service delivering free services to a company charging for integrated leisure, lifestyles and information services in a hub style environment. This was acknowledged to be a major cultural shift, placing additional demands and pressures on staff to deliver in a more competitive environment.

The transition involved a period of staff consultation, redeployment, and recruitment followed by the implementation of new organisational strategies, structures and job roles. Despite these changes the researcher recognised from internal management and monitoring processes that integrated working was still problematic and conversations internally amongst the management team suggested that it would be useful to investigate how to improve this form of working through a pilot. The study was therefore framed as a way of exploring the perceptions, enablers and barriers to integrated working across the different areas of practice within the organisation. The ultimate aim was to enhance integrated working practices.

The researcher decided to utilise an appreciative inquiry informed intervention to undertake the study for two reasons: the organisational context of the study was a sensitive and emotionally charged situation of externally imposed transition and change, so needed an approach that would provide a positive frame and thereby be sensitive to the wellness and health of the participants, and the intervention would focus on forward-looking and actionable outcomes which could then inform other developmental work beyond the initial pilot. As appreciative inquiry was initially conceived as a body of principles to be utilised flexibly in the circumstances of practice (Cooperrider *et al.* 2008), the manager designed an intervention that would be feasible within the context of her organisation and her own management sphere of influence. The next section outlines details of the specific intervention.

An appreciative inquiry informed intervention/method

The researcher designed the intervention as two workshop sessions lasting two hours, over a two-week period. The first session was designed to provide an appreciative space and prompts to generate ideas into integrated working, in line with the broad aspirations of the study (to examine the perceptions, barriers and enablers to integrated working). Based on the aspects of appreciative inquiry framework shown in Figure 1, two sets of identical tables were set up utilising the three aspects of appreciative inquiry:

- (1) Table I – “discovery”: When did we work well together?
- (2) Table II – “dreaming”: What would be the ideal of us working well together look like?
- (3) Table III – “designing”: What do we need to prioritise to make this happen?

Phase	Codes from pictures
Discovery When did we work well together?	Lights for direction, people groups, tasks doing things, movement, outdoor tasks, water, sea, houses homes, stick people, friends family, numbers people, Land, Team building, smiling faces, landmarks e.g. lighthouses, hobbies personal activities, important people to follow, e.g. rugby coaches, organised groups, home repair, motivational activities, identity of groups, construction renovation, e.g. houses garden, equipment for activities
Dream What would be the ideal of us working well together look like?	Multiple skilled people, confidence, asking for guidance, water, animals, e.g. fish ducks dog, church, helpful people, relax and peace, agreement, obstacles to cross, feeling happy when bike works, water sports wind surfing, clouds sky, sense of personal well-being, definite outcome, e.g. cafe, supportive people, direct instructions, teamwork, things working well, sunshine, open spaces, few/no people, passion, actively offering help, work together, sea life fish crabs, smiling faces, helping things grow, knowledge of how environment affects function, e.g. marine tank, in depth knowledge of systems, trust, many people, talking to each other, tools to assist, e.g. free ropes, metaphor, e.g. bike functions, taking care of things, trees, personal interest
Design What needs to be prioritised to make this happen?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Passion 2. Sunshine and brightness 3. Unison 4. Supporting 5. Relaxation, e.g. "flood the skate park" 6. Free ropes 7. Curiosity 8. Harmonious 9. Priority well-being

Table I.
An initial analysis of
the data

The fourth element of the framework, the “destiny” stage, was not utilised in the pilot study for three reasons: any “design” phase outcomes generated through the process would need to be ratified and agreed by other management structures within the organisation, and could not be generated through the pilot study; the timescales of the (academic, work-based learning) project required a rapid turnaround before other changes happened in the organisation; and there was ambiguity over the potential outcomes and experiences of the pilot, so it was important to manage the expectations of the participants and management team. Although the omission of the destiny stage is an unfortunate necessity, it emphasises the adaptable and the flexible nature of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider *et al.* 2008).

An independent facilitator was utilised to facilitate the session, to create a greater sense of independence and to minimise compliance bias (Stokes and Wall, 2014). The facilitator utilised an ice breaker question at the start of the session to help frame the sessions and to “warm up”: participants were asked “what is the best thing that has happened to you today?”. Personal stories were then shared to encourage trust, collective working, and relaxation (Wall and Rossetti, 2013).

Each of the participants were then randomly divided into two sets of five, and then positioned at one of the “discovery” tables (see above). The tablecloth technique, where participants are asked to record their responses on a large paper tablecloth, was used (De Chesnay, 2015). This allows for the capture of more holistic and presentational ways of knowing and enables participants to tap in to unconscious insights and escape the linearity

Rich findings from the adapted appreciative inquiry process			
Theme (what needs to be prioritised?)	Example words, images, and metaphors	Participants' views in relation to integrated working	Example links to the pathways of impact through positive emotion
Passion	Happy, confidence, passion, smiling faces	Enabler and barrier – e.g. linked to the motivational effects of job satisfaction, depending on “individual circumstances”	Positive vision (Calabrese <i>et al.</i> , 2013)
Sunshine	Land, nature plants, clouds sky, feeling happy when bike works, sunshine, trees, smiling faces, green blue yellow brown purple red, positive colours	Enabler – e.g. linked to job satisfaction, assuming the “working environment was taken into consideration”	Positive orientation (Alessandri <i>et al.</i> , 2012)
Unison	Asking for guidance, multiple skilled people, direct instructions, supportive people, things working well, motivational activities, metaphor bike function	“Profound” enabler, but an active barrier if not present – e.g. linked to a positive working culture	Positive relationships (Szczygiela and Mikolajczakb, 2017)
Supporting	Helpful people, teamwork, lights for direction, work together, organised groups, important people to follow, i.e. coach, obstacles to cross, many people	Enabler and barrier – e.g. linked to the motivational effects of working in a team with clear ways of working	Positive relationships and culture of reciprocity (Taylor and Statler, 2014)
Relaxation	Outdoor tasks, personal interest, water, water sports, wind surfing	Enabler and barrier – e.g. linked to having “personal time” for “making sense”	Meaning-making, well-being (Szczygiela and Mikolajczakb, 2017)
Free ropes	Tools to assist, e.g. free ropes, trust, agreement, equipment for activities	Enabler – e.g. linked to creating a space for people to manage themselves, and adapt to and cope with change	Freedom, trust (Harmon, 2013)
Curiosity	In depth knowledge of systems, taking care of things, knowledge of how environment affects function, e.g. marine tank, tasks doing things	Enabler – e.g. linked to having a sense of own “competence” and “confidence”	Motivational curiosity (Sharp <i>et al.</i> , 2017)
Harmonious	Actively offering help, talking to each other, animals: fish, ducks, dog, sea life: fish crabs, pink brown blue green orange black, activity based moving forward being productive	Enabler – e.g. linked to sensing a “connection” to other things particularly in the natural world	Positive relationships and culture of reciprocity (Taylor and Statler, 2014)
Well-being	Hobbies personal activities, water sea, relax and peace, sense of personal well-being, open spaces, physical activity, movement	Enabler and barrier – e.g. linked to having “personal time out” and managing own resilience	Well-being (Gander <i>et al.</i> , 2016)
Community	Friends family, community, people groups, definite outcome, e.g. cafe, houses homes, construction renovation, e.g. house garden, few/no people, landmarks, e.g. lighthouses church, helping things grow, home repair, identity of group, numbers people	Enabler – e.g. through a sense of belonging and connectedness to others, perhaps outside of the organisation	Positive relationships and culture of reciprocity (Szczygiela and Mikolajczakb, 2017)

Table II.
A summary of
the collectively
verified themes

Table III.
Summary of
responses from
participating in
the sessions

<p>Example responses to the question: “What will you take away from this session?”</p>
<p>Personal expression and opinion Thinking Time for reflection Reflection Reflecting on the best thing Appreciation for the things happening that are good</p> <p>Playing with crayons</p> <p>Open minded/Sharing and talking</p> <p>Flow to the process for future situations</p> <p>Taking space to take stock/Making space taking stock</p> <p>Calmness/Relaxation</p>

and literality of language (Reason, 2001; Broussine, 2008; Page *et al.*, 2014). Participants were then asked to:

- (1) answer the table question by writing an individual response on the tablecloth; then
- (2) as a group, discuss the question; then
- (3) write and/or draw a group response on the tablecloth; and then
- (4) move to the next table, and repeat the above, until all tables have been visited.

Once completed, the data generated were predominantly image based, with a diverse set of expressions through shapes, colour, detail, simplicity, landscape, metaphor, and character. The researcher then used Broussine’s (2008) “multifaceted” method to systematically explore and qualitatively analyse picture data utilising the research questions as sub headings. Two of the main qualities used in the analysis of drawings are in part from the metaphorical representation and multifaceted components which offer insights into unconscious thought and expression (Broussine, 2008; Page *et al.*, 2014). Data analysis involved a prolonged and intimate period with the data, iteratively cross-referencing the data in relation to the research questions (Creswell, 2007). An example of a participant drawing is presented in Plate 1, and an initial analysis of the content by the researcher is represented in Table I.

Once analysis had been completed, the second session was then primarily a way to verify the findings from the first session, using a form of peer review and member checking (Creswell, 2007), to help prioritise which would then be taken through to the management structure and process for decision making. The data from the first session (Plate 2) were presented alongside the researcher’s analysis (Plate 3) on large walls and participants were given time to observe and compare. Participants were then invited to reflect on the analysis check whether they thought it represented the original data, e.g. whether everything had been captured, and whether there was anything missing. Next, the participants were invited to move the themes, and asked to collectively agree which items needed priority in terms of being moved forward in action (as part of the “design” phase). This process, and the dialogue that emerged, highlighted that a tenth theme “community” was missing and so this was added.

Plate 1.
An example of
participant drawing in
the “dreaming” phase

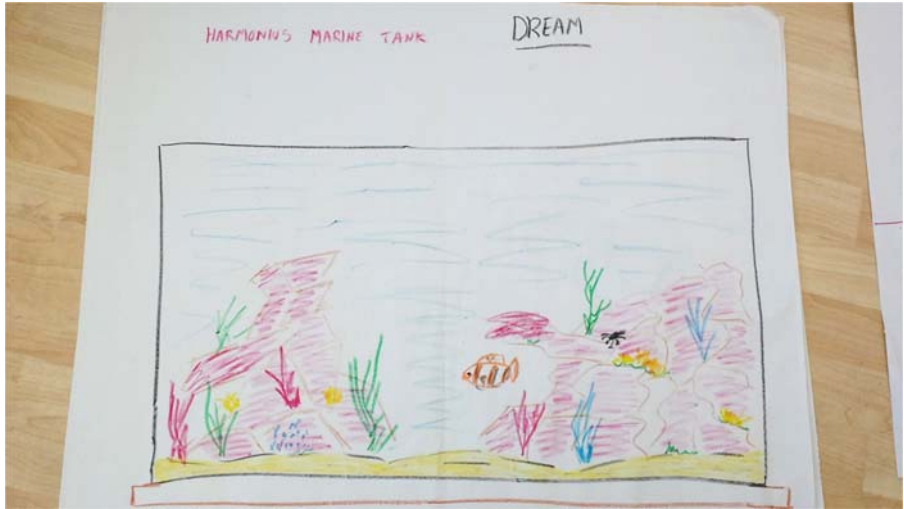


Plate 2.
Collection of data
from the discovery,
dreaming, and
designing phases



Findings and recommendations: insights into integrated working, appreciative inquiry and positive emotion

From the manager's perspective, the appreciative inquiry primarily aimed to generate insight into the perceptions, enablers and barriers of integrated working in a particular localised context and to then inform and enhance working practices. The intention was that the work-based project would provide sufficient detail on these areas to target impact in the workplace through changed policies and practices. The final set of verified themes is outlined in Table II. At the same time, the intention was to be sensitive to the organisational circumstances in which the study was undertaken – or in other words, the pathway to workplace impact purposively took a positive frame, focus, and process. The feedback from

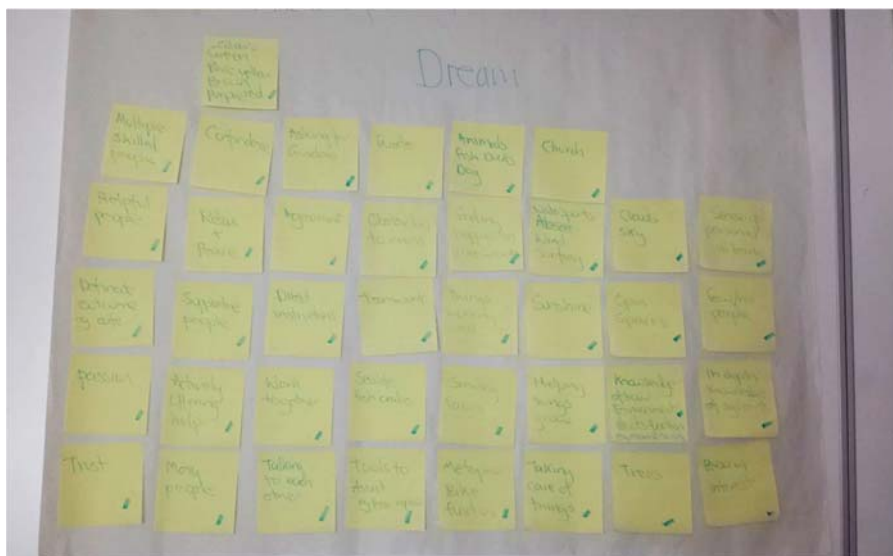


Plate 3.
Example coding
process from the
“dreaming” phase

the sessions indicated that a positive, open, sharing, and reflective space was generated through the particular appreciative inquiry design adopted, as shown in Table III. The following section outlines the themes generated through and verified by the appreciative inquiry, and a selection of the resulting recommendations to the organisation.

Taken together, four aspects of working in an integrated manner appeared to emerge: space, task, equipment and people. This was expressed as a compelling and purposeful vision, which was a central workplace impact generated through the appreciative inquiry process. One way of making sense of this was the narrative: if the environment or space is right with sunshine, relaxation and is harmonious, tasks are done in unison with passion using “free rope” type equipment and people are curious about their work, supporting one another and their well-being. As part of the work-based project (and its assessment), this vision provided the foundation of a management report which encapsulated some aspects of the compelling and positively framed analysis, recommendations and an action plan. This was then presented to the organisation’s extended management meeting and various other team meetings. Due to the need to maintain anonymity, the precise workplace recommendations of the study cannot be presented and discussed in this paper. However, the researcher identified that four broad elements needed to be developed:

- (1) space: infused with sunshine, relaxation and is harmonious;
- (2) tasks: are done in unison with passion;
- (3) equipment: using “free rope” type equipment and styles, perhaps integrating the cultivation of the outdoors that surround the work environment as part of the change strategy; and
- (4) people: are curious about their work, supporting one another, and their well-being.

In order to develop these elements a key initial step is to replicate the appreciative inquiry intervention across the organisation to consolidate further learning and to explore and collate areas of effective practices already in place. In a broader sense, these findings also indicated the way in which the adapted appreciative inquiry process, which was deployed in the case setting as part of a work-based learning project, generated positive emotion as

a space whereby these insights were generated. The final column in Table II indicates a number of positive emotions which seemed to be generated through the appreciative inquiry process including positive orientation, hope, harmony, positive environments (e.g. unison and support), and relaxation. These reflect the characteristics of the pathways to impact discussed earlier, but also demonstrate more localised manifestations or expressions which were meaningful to the participants in the organisation.

Discussion

In a strict sense, whereas positive emotion may form a frame and focus for an intervention, appreciative inquiry may provide a specific intervention as a pathway to generating impact. However, in line with Steigenberger (2015), and as can be seen from the analysis of the work-based project using appreciative inquiry, it is difficult to disentangle or isolate the differential effects of positive emotion and appreciative inquiry processes. They are entangled and mutually reinforcing, for example, it is difficult to see how the portrait painted in Table II, of working together in unison and in the sunshine, can be attained without hope or curiosity. The themes and experiences of participants in this study therefore reflect both the outcomes and the pathways to impacts, and in this way, align closely with contemporary empirical evidence of how positive emotion and appreciative inquiry processes exemplify the pathways to impacts in workplace contexts (Watkins *et al.*, 2016; Sharp *et al.*, 2017). As such, this highlights the importance of the wider ecological system in the workplace which, as described by the participants of this study, as a particular manifestation of “space, task, equipment, and people”, is meaningful to the particular organisational setting.

As part of this wider ecological system, such outcomes and pathways to impact seem to reflect processes which attend to the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness – but also and more directly in terms of positive emotion – the psychological dimensions of self-efficacy, optimism, resilience, and hope (see Tables II and III) (Verleysen *et al.*, 2015). In this way, the wider positive frame and focus can direct the activity in the specific intervention (or pathway to impact) which pays attention to these basic psychological needs. For example, there is increasing recent research into the positive emotion generated through relaxation and mindfulness in organisations and the related impacts on job performance, team conflict, resilience, corporate social responsibility, and subjective well-being (Zeng *et al.*, 2015; Wall, 2016b; Good *et al.*, 2016; Yu and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2017; Fehr *et al.*, 2017). Here, the broader positive frame and focus contains the specific activity in ways that the outcomes can be seen as both the impacts of such positive interventions, but also part of the ecological setting, or “space, task, equipment and people” which form the basis of a pathways to impact.

Despite the complex and challenging circumstances of the case organisation (e.g. under severe austerity measures, siloed cultures, constant threats of reorganisation, and requirement to work across occupational boundaries), this study indicates that a bespoke application of appreciative inquiry can have generative impacts in practice, for example, the compelling vision agreed and validated by a diverse group of occupational groupings in the organisation. However, the study also raises the question of the continued existence of such endeavours, where the manager who undertakes the work-based learning project might typically be located within wider management structures, or where the appreciative inquiry might be a temporary (project bound) intervention/method (for the duration of the academic project) (Wall, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Wall, Jamieson, Csigás and Kiss, 2017; Wall, Hindley, Hunt, Peach, Preston, Hartley and Fairbank, 2017; Wall, 2017b). In other words, the positive frame and focus and the specific intervention in the workplace are time-bound.

Within the context of time-bound appreciative inquiry projects, the extent to which the impacts go beyond the project may link to the nature of the organisation and job design outside of the discrete project and project cycle. One of the important factors that appears to be the availability of resources for positive affect within the workplace setting, thereby limiting the pathways to impact and therefore the perpetuation of impacts. Xanthopoulou *et al.* (2012) found a positive association between perceived job resources (e.g. autonomy, supervisory coaching, cooperation, and warmth) and positive emotion as experienced on a daily basis, including experiences of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism. This means that should organisational structures and practices be designed in ways which support positive emotion, this is likely to promote the longevity of the impacts generated through appreciative inquiry as designed through a work-based learning project. In contrast, should the resources for positive emotion not be in place, the impacts and pathways to these impacts (such as appreciative inquiry) may be very limited in terms of time and organisational location.

Similarly, the extent to which impacts reach beyond specific work-based projects utilising appreciative inquiry project cycles may also be linked to the localised “affective climate”, or the particular types of affective experiences or expressions that are expected in practices, routines and leadership, of an organisation or its sub units (Parke and Seo, 2017). For example, affective climates such as positive display climates, negative display climates, and neutral display climates, differentially values, support, reward and manage particular emotions, thereby shaping how people relate to each other and therefore how performance is managed more broadly. These are important considerations in terms of the extent to which positive emotion frames and focusses pathways to impact in workplaces, and especially in relation to appreciative inquiry.

To embed workplace activities, or sustain particular ways of working, from a time-limited work-based project utilising appreciative inquiry may well be coherent in a positive display climate, but may well be problematic or disastrous within a neutral or negative display climate (Parke and Seo, 2017). Indeed, such insights have previously been identified in earlier research into organisational learning and emotion. In workplace contexts where learning meets or exceeds expectations, people can experience comfort or excitement. Conversely, where there is a mismatch between the expectations and experiences of learning people experience unproductive anxiety and frustration (Shipton and Sillince, 2013; Sillince and Shipton, 2013).

However, recent evidence also suggests that such mismatches may also produce generative outcomes. For example, Rothman and Melwani (2017) document evidence of workplace situations where people experienced complexity in their emotions, or indeed indifference, and emphasised how this can lead to greater affective and cognitive flexibility and therefore enhanced adaptive capacities. Similarly, Miron-Spektor *et al.* (2017) have found that a “paradox mindset”, or the extent to which a person accepts and is energised by emotional tension, can help enhance performance and workplace innovation. Though the evidence currently suggests that such flexibility outcomes are variable, they do tend to enable more proactive action (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2017). In the context of designing and implementing work-based projects, it is important that the work-based researcher is aware of these expectations and tensions in the localised workplace context. The extent to which bespoke forms of positive pathways to workplace impacts such as appreciative inquiry can generate impacts beyond the life of the academic work-based project is therefore a complex but developing landscape of understanding.

Conclusions and implications

This paper has highlighted the role of positive emotions in generating workplace impacts. Moreover, it has provided new evidence about how managers can generate positive emotion and change efforts by adapting appreciative inquiry interventions/methods as part of a work-based learning project. In addition, the study raises questions about the extent to

which such positive change efforts could be embedded or sustained beyond the work-based learning project. Key considerations here are the availability of broader resources for positive affect in organisations, the broader affective climate of organisations or organisational units, and the availability of “paradox mindset” capabilities to be able to deal with the emotional complexities should mismatches occur. Practically, there are a number of insights, which might have greater utility for managers:

- the evidence of the impact of asset- or strengths- based interventions/methods continue to expand and provide a useful option amongst difficult organisational circumstances;
- appreciative inquiry is a flexible set of principles which can be adapted for the circumstances of work-based projects, and can generate positive emotions and action plans; and
- when implemented as a work-based learning project, appreciative inquiry might have limited effects, but this depends on the wider resources, climates and circumstances, and the capacities of people to deal with emotional complexity.

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Further reading

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