

Introduction

My favourite quote of the millennium so far comes from Charles Leadbetter's new book, 'Living on Thin Air'. If the key to the eighteenth century is Adam Smith, he says, then the key to the twenty-first century is Delia Smith¹. This is because recipes, together with the way that Delia packages and promotes them, are the way in which knowledge is codified. It can then be passed on to millions, whereas cooking was previously passed on mainly from mother to daughter.

In the field of participation, PLA approaches to development provide one such recipe, or set of recipes. The purpose of this article is to describe what I think is another emerging recipe. In this article, we describe the whole process, then illustrate the various stages and finally review its strengths and weaknesses.

'Imagine' is our version of 'Appreciative Inquiry'. Taking each component in turn:

- Appreciation is recognising the best in people or the world around us; affirming past or present strengths, successes and potentials; and perceiving those things that give life to people and organisations;
- Inquiry is concerned with exploration and discovery; asking questions to understand; and, being open to new potentials and possibilities.

Appreciative Inquiry works from a set of assumptions which are presented below.

1. In every society, organisation or group, something works. The tendency at turning points or crises is to look at what is not working and start problem solving. At these times, people become demoralised and feel that life is hopeless. By recognising the current difficulty and learning from previous successes, people feel competent again and become willing to address the issue.

2. The act of asking people questions influences them in some way. Asking questions, about how they see a situation and how they would like to see the future, helps people build up a picture of that future. It also helps them to focus on the possibilities of the future rather than trying to right the wrongs of the past.

¹ A well-known celebrity chef in the UK, famed for her television cookery programmes and cookery books.

3. People have more confidence to journey to the unknown future when they discover and carry forward the best of the past. By doing this, they know how to repeat their successes.

Imagine has three stages:

- Understand – choose questions that draw out the best of the past;
- Imagine – use the best of the past to imagine what might be; and,
- Co-create – form partnerships between organisations and individuals to take projects forward.

What happens in practice is that Imagine starts with a group developing appreciative questions. Next, they use those questions to talk to a wider group. Then they develop their answers into 'provocative propositions' – challenging statements about how the future should be. Finally, these propositions are presented to the wider group of people who need to be involved in making these propositions come true.

Understand – developing appreciative questions

During 1991 and 1992, Bliss Browne, a priest and banker, planned a pilot study that would discover what gives life to Chicago and provide significant leadership opportunities for youth. This led to Imagine Chicago, the inspiration for Imagine projects in Britain. 1993-94 saw both city-wide and community-based pilot projects. City-wide, 50 young people were recruited and trained as interviewers. They interviewed about 140 citizens, identified as 'Chicago Glue'. Bliss Browne had earlier asked a group of 50 13-year olds if they thought they would live in Chicago when they grew up. Six of the kids raised their hands. She then asked if they thought they could make a difference. Pretty much the same six hands went up.

So Bliss and her colleagues worked with the young people to show that their questions in the interviews could make a difference. In one case, four out of seven groups chose crime as their topic. Bliss asked what effect questions about crime would have. One kid said, "I'd know all the things to be scared of". Another said, "The policeman would feel bad because he'd be reminded that he wasn't doing a very

good job". So Bliss was able to suggest that taking community safety as their topic would be more positive.

Finally, she asked about the effect of the kids sending a thank you letter after the interview.

Brown: *How would the policeman feel?*

Young people: *Pretty good.*

Brown: *What would happen if you had a problem a month later and wanted to talk to him?*

Young people: *He'd want to listen.*

Box 1. Shows the main questions that they asked

Box 1 Questions the young people asked

- Thinking back over your Chicago memories, what have been real high points for you as a citizen of the city?
- Why did these experiences mean so much to you?
- How would you describe the quality of life in Chicago today?
- What changes in the city would you most like to see? What do you imagine your own role might be in helping to make this happen? Who could work with you?
- Close your eyes and "imagine" Chicago as you most want it to be a generation from now. What is it like? What do you see and hear? What are you proudest of having accomplished?
- As you think back over this conversation, what images stand out for you as capturing your hopes for this city's future?

The questions need careful crafting. As we saw above, 'The act of asking people questions influences them in some way.' Change the question and you change the effect. One of the questions developed by a church in Ohio was: *"If you were a non-Christian but someone alive to the spiritual values of life, what would you find most attractive about the church?"*.

The members of the group developing the questions tried the questions out on each other and then on two people outside the group. As a result, they decided to turn the question round to put the emphasis on what the church should do rather than on the attitudes of the non-Christian. It became: *"If we were really keen on attracting non-members who are alive to spiritual values, what aspects of our life should we highlight?"*

Understand – using the questions

The New Economics Foundation (NEF)² worked with Age Concern London, UK, on their contribution to the *Debate of the Age*, which is about our future in an ageing society. Age Concern wanted a group of young people, who could be the decision-makers of tomorrow, to draw on the experiences of older people to develop their vision of how they want to grow old and the society they want to grow

old in. They also wanted to communicate that vision to today's decision-makers.

Box 2 shows one of the questions that a group of four younger people evolved in the first stage, followed by a couple of the answers from nearly fifty older people (aged from 50 to over 90) in the second stage.

Box 2 A younger person's question and two older people's answers

What do you enjoy most about living in London?

"I'm a more patient person and certainly more contented. I'm more philosophical."

"It's the range of things you can do that I likebeing able to make friendly conversations with peopleproper conversations, not rushedtime to break down the barriers, time to be with older, younger and disabled people and a listening ear."

We also ran an event for the London Borough of Hackney for 40 15-year olds, on Hackney's energy in the year 2050. Before the event, we arranged interviews for them with assorted specialists. This worked very well. At the event, the young people themselves provided the knowledge-base through their interview reports, which made them much more positive than had they simply been talked at.

Imagine – developing provocative propositions

In January, we were involved in a project to find out what makes people feel 'At Home in Waterloo'. Waterloo is a very mixed area of London. There are many people who are homeless, living on the streets and a lot of council housing. There is also the rail terminus for the Channel Tunnel and the South Bank arts centres. The project entailed ten people (residents, formerly homeless people and homelessness agencies) conducting appreciative interviews with a range of people across the local area. The questions they asked sought to find out what people think is best about Waterloo and what they would like to see in a vision for the future of Waterloo.

Through this process eight key issues were identified and from these, four Provocative Propositions were created. One of the Provocative Propositions said:

'Today's Waterloo is an interdependent community where everyone is valued, accepted, listened to and recognised as having a special contribution to make. People accept the responsibility to treat others, especially those who are

² A UK-based non-governmental organisation that aims to put people and the environment at the centre of economic thinking. It works on issues such as participation, community indicators, community finance and globalisation.

normally excluded, in this way. The wider community's activities seek to include the excluded'.

The proposition is illustrated by the following quotes from the interviews.

"Here you can live. Some places you can't. Whether you are white, Chinese, black or Asian, everyone gets on. It's known for it round here".

"Being on the streets means that there is often nobody for homeless people to talk to as 'normal' people ignored them or were frightened of them. When someone out of a crowd says 'Hello' and asks them how they feel then that makes them feel normal again".

"One Christmas Eve, waiters from a banquet in the South Bank brought large turkeys and trifles on silver salvers to the Bull Ring. That was a great day!".

Returning to case of the church in Ohio mentioned previously, the working group there read the notes of their interviews and came up with 17 themes, which were slowly reduced to 12. Each person then chose the three stories that had most inspired them. This led to a first set of provocative propositions. These were tested by asking: 'What deep need is this proposition seeking to meet?'. This led to a final list of six propositions. Their focus was not on the internal life of the church but on its relationship with its wider community. This was to the surprise of the facilitator, Charles Elliott, author of an excellent book on Appreciative Inquiry³, The example below illustrates this, as well as showing how propositions develop.

One story was about a woman in her late thirties who was involved in a very messy divorce and who wandered into St Luke's in desperation. A church helper found her sobbing and silently held her as she sobbed. The woman found this spontaneous, unquestioning acceptance by a stranger one of the deepest, most god-revealing moments of her life.

Two of the initial propositions, which might have owed something to this particular story, were that:

- St Luke's exists primarily for the people outside it. In all our activities, use of resources and proclamations, we honour that fact; and,
- St Luke's is an ark which shelters people who have been damaged and by accepting them unconditionally, re-equips them to live and to love.

One of the final propositions was:

- St Luke's is inclusive. It comprises people at different stages of their spiritual pilgrimages and sustains, nourishes and encourages them all. We recognise that it is in the meeting of people's deepest need, inside and outside the church, that we are often enabled to make

progress in our own journeys and for that reason we give a high priority to a corporate life of reflective service to those around us.

The propositions were presented in place of the readings and sermon in the parish communion. Everyone received a copy, with two stories for each proposition. This they read, then in groups of six picked out the two propositions they liked best. If all the members of a group disliked one of the propositions, however, they could veto it by holding up a 'torpedo card'.

Co-create – involving more people in action

The American church, like most churches, is used to cutting its coat according to its cloth. But someone who had originally resisted the whole Appreciative Inquiry approach declared this 'old way' to be 'redundant'. Instead, the church launched Appreciative Inquiry based fund-raising for their outreach programme, such as work with HIV babies. This involved engaging donors in an appreciative approach to their own community. They asked them questions such as 'What do you care about in this community?' to help potential donors to share their vision of a community that cared for its most needy and most neglected.

Since 1995, Imagine Chicago has seeded the appreciative approach by forming partnerships with over 100 community organisations, schools, communities of faith and cultural institutions. An example is the Urban Imagination Network. Six state schools and five Chicago museums are working to improve student reading comprehension.

Strengths and weaknesses

The strengths, illustrated by Imagine Chicago in particular, are the following.

- It is good at dialogue between generations.
- It is good for giving direct access to decision-making groups, such as for example, young people who can't normally get near them.
- It emphasises the positive, which counteracts cynicism and promotes action.
- It roots this dialogue in institutions that can act.

The weaknesses apply particularly to our attempt to evolve a model or recipe that is easy for others to pick up and use. We have successfully developed workshop formats for generating the questions and the provocative propositions. The interviewing has generally gone well, although we would like to find ways of encouraging interviewees to be more conversational (so 'interview' is not the ideal word) and to concentrate on drawing out stories. We have not succeeded in 'rooting the dialogue in institutions that can act'. With both Age Concern London and Imagine Waterloo, we organised conferences at which the interviewees and interviewees presented their findings.

³ *Locating the Energy for Change: An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*, Charles Elliott, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, Canada, 1999. See especially the comparison with PRA in chapter 11.

These conferences were a good deal more participative than usual. But they failed to give the audience the experience of appreciative inquiry that enthused the people who took part in the earlier stages.

We didn't always manage to convince people that appreciative inquiry is not about looking only at the good and ignoring the bad. This is illustrated by a comment from one of the younger people involved in the Age Concern project.

"But at its worst, Appreciative Inquiry did slip into a type of therapy-speak, a deliberately saccharine way to address the world. There are always going to be times when accentuating the positive doesn't give the whole picture, when individuals want their lives to be seen in the round for better and for worse".

In another excellent book on appreciative inquiry⁴, the approach of one of the contributors to this difficult issue is described. She asks the client to 'remember that if people hold in their mind what is wrong, they also hold in their mind what should be present to make it right'. Getting this across repeatedly in different ways is quite a challenge.

Imagine at work

I end with another quote from the younger person from the Age Concern project. It shows how rich the experience can be.

"The best part was certainly meeting and listening to the older people, all of them lively, interesting and great fun. I don't know how typical I am in not having had much close contact with older people... So it was a new experience to hear about the lives and views of these people. What they had to say was rooted in their own experience and eminently realistic".

The biggest lesson was not to stereotype. Each older person has a different set of wants and needs. Against expectations, older people can be more imaginative and flexible than younger generations.

Conclusion

The experience has given me a far more optimistic view of the future. I could mention several individuals who were memorable, but the last one I saw can stand for them all. Alice is 92 and a great grandmother. She has glaucoma and walks with a stick. Her life has included internment with her small children in Hong Kong during the war. More recently the loss of her sight caused her to cut back on voluntary work – she gave up serving in a charity shop when she found she had to ask customers what the prices were. She is full of good ideas (my favourite was adoptive grannies on call for isolated young mothers) and sceptical about politicians. She lives independently and cooks her own meals and the last I saw of her she was setting off for the bus stop on her way home – still enjoying life and still in control.

**Perry Walker, Co-ordinator, Centre for Participation,
The New Economics Foundation, 6-8 Cole Street,
London SE1 4YH, UK. Tel: +44 (0) 20 7407 7447
Email: Perry.Walker@neweconomics.org
Website: www.neweconomics.org**

Notes

'Imagine' is one of the techniques in '*Participation Works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century*', available from NEF. For further information, please contact NEF on the above telephone number or email info@neweconomics.org

NEF co-ordinates the UK Community Participation Network. Contact Julie Lewis (Julie.Lewis@neweconomics.org) for details. An Appreciative Inquiry network is co-ordinated by Anne Radford, 303 Bankside Lots, 65 Hopton Street, London SE1 9JL, UK. Tel: +44 (0)7000 077 011 Fax: +44 (0)7000 077012; Email: AnneLondon@aol.com

⁴ *Lessons from the Field*, edited by Sue Annis Hammond and Cathy Royal, Practical Press, Texas, USA, 1998, ISBN 0-9665373-0-0. Chapter 8 describes how The Mountain Institute in Nepal has combined appreciative inquiry with PRA.