

## Engaging VET Practitioners Forum RPL – Done Well

### Using appreciative inquiry to increase the practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL)

*A brief statement on Reframing the Future's innovative use of the methodology of appreciative inquiry to increase the practice of RPL in vocational education and training (VET)*

You gotta accent-tu-ate the positive,  
E-lim-inate the negative,  
An' latch on  
To the affirmative  
Don't mess with Mister In-between!

(Verse from lyrics for 'Accentuate the Positive' by Johnny Mercer)

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach ... based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a vision of what is possible rather than an analysis of what is not. (David Cooperrider)

#### **Innovative methodologies**

Since 2000 Reframing the Future has provided leadership to the sector in its use of staff development methodologies such as networks, communities of practice and professional conversations. This leadership was acknowledged in the external evaluation of the program in late 2004, which compared the program to others around the world and declared the program to be world class.

Continuing this leadership, in 2006 Reframing the Future is modeling the use of appreciative inquiry for national staff development. While the methodology of appreciative inquiry has been used in occasional Australian VET staff development activities and research projects, Reframing the Future is using it as an innovative strategy for addressing a high priority issue in the sector: increasing the practice of recognition of prior learning (RPL).

A rigorous use of pivotal appreciative inquiry methodology underpins Reframing the Future's series of pivotal forums in August and November 2006 as well as the activities before and after the forums. Details about these forums, including the program and expression of interest forms, are available from [www.reframingthefuture.net](http://www.reframingthefuture.net)

#### **Briefly, what is appreciative inquiry (AI)?**

A doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University in the 1980s, David Cooperrider, and his faculty mentor Suresh Srivastva are acknowledged as pioneering the use of appreciative inquiry. In undertaking change projects, they found that in focusing on organisational problems and designing interventions to address the problems, the problems seemed to multiply. However, when they reframed their

approach as an inquiry, in the sense of seeking to learn and discover the positive forces within an organisation, they shifted their own and their subjects' attention away from the causes of failure and turned attention to the causes of success.

When initially developing the methodology of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and others decided to focus on stories of innovation, hope and positive change. They set out to find examples of success and experiences of high points. In this way, they constructed a methodology for influencing change that concentrated on the positives within an organisation, not the organisation's deficiencies.

The appreciative inquiry methodology focuses on the causes and examples of success, as explained by Ludema et al. (2003):

Appreciative inquiry is an approach to organisation change that has been used successfully in small- and large-change projects with hundreds of organisations worldwide. It is based on the simple idea that organizations move in the direction of what they ask questions about. For example, when groups study human problems and conflicts, they often find that both the number and severity of these problems grow. In the same way, when groups study high human ideals and achievements, such as peak experiences, best practices and noble accomplishments, these phenomena, too, tend to flourish. Appreciative inquiry distinguishes itself from other change methodologies by deliberately asking positive questions to ignite constructive dialogue and inspired action within organisations. (p.259)

It is important to stress that appreciative inquiry is not viewed by Reframing the Future as superior to the many other methodologies that seek to identify organisational problems and look for solutions: it is simply an alternative. It is appropriate to use appreciative inquiry when the goal is to find ways to move forward, rather than to continue to identify obstacles and problem solve.

### **Accepting that there are barriers to RPL**

While the methodology of appreciative inquiry builds on the positives, it does not preclude an acknowledgement of obstacles. Reframing the Future acknowledges that the obstacles to RPL have been enumerated in detail in many fine research reports in recent years. See, for example:

Bowman, K., Clayton, B., Bateman, A., Knight, B., Thompson, P.L., Hargreaves, J., Blom, K. & Enders, M. (2003), *Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector*, NCVET, Adelaide. Available at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/teaching/publications/1342.html>

The Reframing the Future forums take into account that many barriers have prevented the uptake of RPL and forum participants will be encouraged to develop an understanding of these barriers. To assist this understanding, Reframing the Future will provide participants with references to VET reports that clearly identify barriers, such as the report cited above, and with a copy of NCVET's 2006 publication, *Recognition of prior learning: At a glance*.

### **Why Reframing the Future is using AI for its *RPL-Done Well* forums**

While Ludema et al. (2003) describe the use of appreciative inquiry for four-day summits, Reframing the Future is adapting the methodology for a learning activity that commences before a one-day forum, pivots on a one-day intensive forum, and continues for some months after the forum is conducted.

The appreciative inquiry methodology will offer *RPL-Done Well* forum participants a participative, collaborative and systematic method for discovering and building on the

positive aspects of successful approaches to RPL that are used in VET.

Appreciative inquiry used within forums focuses participants on the positive aspects of what is happening now in an organisation or sector, and what can be achieved in the future. This positive focus is appropriate for these RPL forums, as the forums are targeted at existing and future good practice, not policies.

The benefits of an appreciative inquiry methodology for each forum include the following:

- The forum will highlight for participants the positive aspects of the current VET system in relation to RPL, including current capabilities, effective practices and successful case studies
- The forum will highlight instances of successful practice in RPL, examples from a variety of VET contexts and exemplars of innovation and change
- The forum will provide easy and immediate access to valuable ideas and information
- The forum will engage participants in envisioning, designing and implementing improved approaches to RPL
- The forum is designed to engender confidence and stimulate inventiveness and lead to improved practice and positive, sustainable change.

To optimise benefits for forum participants, the appreciative inquiry methodology also will be used to frame both the pre-forum and post-forum activities:

- Pre-forum activities will include identification by participants of success stories; and interviews by the management team with a sample of participants on their successes with RPL.
- Post-forum activities will include taking on the role of RPL catalyst within an organisation and sharing of new practices and successes by innovation teams.

## **Evaluation**

Reframing the Future is evaluating its use of the methodology of appreciative inquiry for these professional development activities in RPL and will report on its findings at the conclusion of the program. Formative evaluation will include observing the response to the methodology at each forum and obtaining verbal and written feedback from participants. The summative evaluation will include reporting on the concrete outputs and immediate outcomes of the forums.

## **References and further reading**

Cooperrider, D.L. & Srivastara, S. (1987), *Appreciative inquiry in organizational life*. In W.A. Passmore & R.W. Woodman (eds.), *Research in organizational change and development* (Vol.1), Jai Press, Greenwich CT.

Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. (1999), *Collaborating for change: Appreciative inquiry*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco.

Ludema, J.D., Whitney, D., Mohr, B.J. & Griffin, T. (2003), *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit: A practitioner's guide for leading large-group change*, Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc, San Francisco.

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