Appreciative Inquiry – an alternative to problem based learning?

Background Information

Problem Based Learning (PBL) contextualises learning, relating it to the real world rather than being driven by curriculum content, and as such it is now an established learning and teaching method in health programmes. However problems have been identified by some PBL facilitators, and a possible solution to these difficulties direct educators towards a new context for learning, namely Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This new paradigm has been referred to as a “philosophy, a revolutionising force, a transformational change process, a life giving theory and practice, and even a new world view” (Orem, Binkert and Clancy: 2007, p 24).

AI was developed in organisational development where problem solving was found to be an overused method for effecting change. AI searched for ways to shift the prevailing strategy away from fixing problems that might or might not make an organisation better toward discovering what individuals or businesses wanted their organisation to be. Instead on focusing on what was not working, they began exploring what gave life to people and their workplaces when they were at their very best (Cooperider and Sripastva, 1987).

Within Occupational Therapy (OT) education AI offers a shift from the tradition where the inherent focus is on what is wrong with clients. AI appears to envisage what might be (based on what is), and
appears to stimulate a dialogue on what should be, before finally focusing on what will be, offering a deeper and richer view of the individual. AI assumes that this positive learning experience comes from collaboratively studying, giving particular energy and attention to, and therefore replicating, that which is working well for the student and in turn for the client.

Some PBL theorists will challenge the relevance of AI in this context arguing that the PBL cycle already allows the opportunity for students to identify their clients’ strengths and weaknesses within their trigger and the problem solving cycle. AI goes further, it has the potential to empower students to use an adapted model of PBL that uses the best of this perspective with individual clients to create and sustain the energy needed to act into a more positively envisioned future.

The aim of this study was to develop and evaluate the introduction of AI as an innovative pedagogy with two cohorts of BSc OT students on a PBL programme at one university in the UK. It was proposed that this positive attitude and creativity would impact on the client experience when students are in practice.

**Method**
A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, as there is to date no research on AI in OT education. The data were gathered by means of focus groups with the students and individual semi-structured interviews with the staff and practice educators.

The participants were 25 first year full time students, 6 staff who taught these students and 2 practice educators who had supervised these students. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant ethics committees.

The schedule for the focus groups and the interviews consisted of open-ended questions about experience of AI as a learning and teaching method, and how this fitted with practice placement experiences.

Following ethical approval the students who agreed to participate were divided into four focus groups. One researcher then conducted all the focus groups and interviews, which were audio-taped with permission. Each focus group and interview lasted approximately one hour. Tapes were all transcribed verbatim.

Analysis was inductive and thematic. In order to increase trustworthiness and credibility, investigator triangulation was employed.
Results
Four main themes were agreed and these are presented below.

Understanding AI
Students discussed AI with reference to PBL. They questioned the language of AI, and what was different about AI and other ways of talking about clients. They generally saw AI as pushing them in a different direction, which they found ‘interesting’, ‘useful’ and ‘exciting’. They compared AI to PBL, which is currently used on practice placement, and which employ language which encourages a problem solving approach.

Some respondents were unsure to what extent the term ‘appreciative inquiry’ was particularly useful, claiming that it was no different from being client centred.

Benefiting from AI
Participants believed strongly in this. They described how using AI to guide their therapeutic encounters brought benefits both to the clients and to the therapist. Students discussed the differences between focusing on what clients believed they could do, and on what they could not do. In contrast to traditional problem solving approaches to practice, AI had encouraged them to concentrate on the ‘beauty’, ‘spirituality’ of clients, what one called ‘the worth of the individual’.

The relationship between client and therapist
Both student and staff interviews emphasise the perspective of the appreciative eye in focusing on the positive where traditionally focus would have been on problem solving. There is however some questioning over what exactly should happen when there is difficulty in identifying positive past experiences. There is recognition that clients who are currently seriously ill may not be able to see anything positive in their past lives.

Constraints on AI practice
It was generally recognized and apparent in almost all transcripts that settings were regarded as crucial to therapists’ ability to take an AI perspective. Opinion is clearly that mental health settings are more conducive to this approach.

Some of the discussion was around the role of the student when faced with a practice educator who regarded AI as just another fashion. This was a frequent challenge for the students, as well as for those staff who were committed to AI.
Implications of study

As a result of this study AI has been introduced within the revalidated OT programme at the University where the researchers are based. It will be incorporated into a first year module which is linked to bodily systems and conditions. It will be used by presenting students with innovative scenarios e.g. diaries, role play, etc.

This action research demonstrates that the role of research in the university has been applied in developing and influencing curriculum content within a health care setting. A full evaluation of the introduction of AI within this module will be conducted, and the results disseminated via education and health resources.

References
