

## **Students' Experiences in Appreciative Interviews for Quality Education in Liberia**

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**Abstract:** *Between September 2017 and August 2018, the author of this article applied the theory of appreciative inquiry in teaching at a faith based institution in Liberia. Appreciative Inquiry was popularized by Cooperrider in 1986. It has to do with asking positive questions following the 5Ds namely Definition, Description, Dream, Design and Destiny. This article highlighted the experiences of students who used appreciative interviews in a course Principles and Practices of Education taught at a faith based institution located in Liberia. The course was offered thrice to three different sets of students at the same university by the author of this article. While the first class had four students, the second had thirteen students and the third had eight students. Each student was asked to make use of appreciative inquiry questions to interview two veteran educators from other educational institutions in Liberia. The findings reinforced the need for the practices of quality education within and without the walls of classrooms in Liberia. The paper recommended that educators should employ the appreciative inquiry in their teaching. Hence, the combination of appreciative inquiry with cooperative learning and the integration of faith and learning could be one of alternatives in tackling the many educational challenges in the classrooms.*

**Keywords:** Adventist higher education, appreciative inquiry, quality education, interviews, Liberia

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of the millennium in 2000, some world leaders gathered together and specified certain goals which they called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Assembly, 2015; Sachs, 2012; United Nations Development Program, 2015). The seven MDGs were meant to make the world a better place for all. Fifteen years after the inception, the world leaders decided to build upon the MDGs by coming up with eight goals called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Robert, Parris and Leiserowitz, 2005; Sachs, 2012; SDG, 2018; UNDP, 2015). Through these goals, the world is expected to have accomplished the 17 SDGs by the year 2030 (Assembly, 2015; Robert, Parris and Leiserowitz, 2005; Sachs, 2012; SDG, 2018; UNDP, 2015).

Quality education is the fourth sustainable development goals (Nazar, Chaudhry, Ali, and Faheem, 2018, p.493) whose target was for boys and girls in every country to have access to free, equitable and quality primary and secondary

education by the year 2030. Proper early childhood education was the second, while the third target was about effective learning environment (Global Giving, 2000-2020; Nazar, Chaudhry, Ali, and Faheem, 2018; Sachs, 2012; SDG, 2018). However, some third world countries are said to be left far behind in achieving the SDGs (Global Giving, 2000-2020). Liberia, as a third world country and a member of the United Nations Organization is also concerned with achieving the SDG-4 but is greatly challenged by scars from its past history.

In the education department of a faith based university in Liberia, future teachers were trained to offer quality education in the classrooms. One of the courses offered in that department was "EDFO 122 Principles and Practices of Education." Since one of integral aspects for quality education is to provide learners the opportunity to interact with practitioners and other learners, the class members were required to interview practitioners and share the interview report with the entire class on what they had learned. This article is therefore a report on the teaching and learning experience that

transpired in the EDFO 122 Principles and Practices of Education classes taught for three semesters at a faith based university in Liberia. The report is divided into five parts: description of the course, appreciative interviews, responses to the appreciative interviews, lessons learned from the appreciative interviews and finally conclusions and recommendations.

### **Description of the Course**

The course EDFO 122 Principles and Practices of Education is a three hour credit course taught in the Education Department at a faith based university located in Liberia. In the course, the students were introduced to key concepts and definitions from various authorities in the field of education. The course covered specific concepts including the aims of education for an individual, family and the societal at large, models of teaching, classroom organization and management, harmony in the school, freedom and authority as well as the curriculum development process (Academic Bulletin, 2018).

Cooperative Learning and the Integration of Faith and Learning (IFL) practices were two of the best practices employed in the teaching and learning process of the course. Cooperative learning, according to Green and Henriquez- Green (2008), must have the following five characteristics: positive interdependence, individual accountability, grouping, social skills and face-to-face interaction. The Integration of Faith and Learning, on the other hand, helped the teacher and the students to develop in a wholesome manner (Trye, 2017; Trye, 2020).

### **Appreciative Interviews**

The theory and practices of Appreciative Inquiry is an idea that was made popular by Cooperrider (1986). The practice of appreciative inquiry in research or teaching has to do with asking positive questions following the 5Ds namely Definition, Description, Dream, Design and Destiny (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999; 2005). For instance, using the theory of appreciative inquiry resulted to the ten innovation configuration components for integration of faith and learning practices in Adventist Higher Educational Institutions (Trye, Jr. 2017).

The research approach used for this study was qualitative using appreciative interview questions. The research participants were students in the course. While the first class contained four students, the second contained 13 students and the third was

made up of eight students. The students were asked to interview teachers from other institutions of learning in Liberia. They were given the following six appreciative guiding interview questions:

1. What is your personal philosophy of teaching?
2. What motivates you or keep you going as a teacher?
3. How do you manage your classroom? Kindly share with me some of your daily classroom principles and practices.
4. What would be your suggestions for university administrators, teachers and students in Liberia?
5. Would you kindly recommend any useful textbooks or resource materials for this course?
6. Please do you have any other comments about Principles and Practices of Education in universities in Liberia?

### **Responses to the Appreciative Interviews**

Along with the appreciative interview guiding questions, each student was given two informed consent forms to take to any two educators. For ethical reasons, the students sought permission from the participants before proceeding with data collection. Thus, the analysis was based on the data collected by the students.

The first question was: *what is your personal philosophy of teaching?* From this question, there were four themes gathered from the educators under investigation. These included impart Knowledge, motivate People, improve the society and promote the Philosophy of Education. For example, according to Teacher MD, "Education is taking someone from the dark to the light." Teacher AY said, "I see teaching as a career path that is followed by those who generally believe in Jesus Christ. My own philosophy of teaching is not far from what Jesus taught in the Bible. It has to do with spiritual nourishment, physical improvement and moral enrichment." Teacher KJ said, "my personal philosophy is to produce men and women for a better future that will not be corrupted by any society."

The second question was: *what motivates you or keep you going as a teacher?* The responses of the participants are reflected in the following themes: seeing alumni imparting society positively, passion for teaching and seeing the willingness of students to learn. For example, Teacher AY said, "the most important thing that motivates me is to see that

those students I taught are imparting to the society positively.”

The third question was: *how do you manage your classroom? Kindly share with me some of your daily classroom principles and practices.* The responses were: ground rules, classroom interaction, grouping students, praying in class and seating arrangement.

The fourth question was: *what would be your suggestions for university administrators, teachers and students in Liberia?* In response to this question, nine suggestions were given by the teachers from various institutions in Liberia. They were:

1. Institutions and teachers should work in line with the curriculum given by the government through the ministry of education.
2. Teachers should have teaching styles that motivate students to participate fully in the process of learning.
3. Teachers should be able to attain the international standards in order to be recognized worldwide.
4. Administrators and teachers should improve academically, morally and spiritually so that issue of seeing teachers for grades after exams will not be done.
5. Administrators and teachers should be present and timely in their classes.
6. Teachers should respect students and students should respect teachers.
7. Administrators and teachers should be passionate about their profession,
8. Every teacher should have a degree in Education before being allowed to teach in the classroom.
9. Departments should be set up at every university to aid students in choosing their career.

The last of the appreciative interview questions was: *would you kindly recommend any useful textbooks or resource materials for this course? (b) Do you have any other comments about Principles and Practices of Education in universities in Liberia?* The educators mentioned textbooks by authors who were not Liberians. Teacher YP mentioned that “All teachers should engage in research practices. This will help them to be updated with new materials.” YP further stressed that “Teaching is not about failing students. Teachers are to make students learn and achieve their goals.”

The implication of this finding is that some of the teachers teaching in higher educational institutions are not publishing textbooks. They rely on outdated textbooks written by other scholars from outside the country. This finding was an eye-opener to the author. It was a motivation and call to educators in higher education to publish textbooks that are contextually relevant to the education phenomena in Liberia.

### **Lessons Learned From the Appreciative Interviews**

On the last day of class, the students were asked to present their findings from the appreciative interviews in class. The students were excited to learn from the experiences of other teachers. They were excited because their presentation skills were enhanced by what they learned from the practice of appreciative inquiry in teaching. First, the students learned a new way of doing assignment by appreciating the method of appreciative inquiry. Second, from the appreciative interviews, the students discovered that there were teachers who were teaching in the classrooms in Liberia who did not obtain any degree or training in Education. Third, the textbooks used by the educators were international. The implication is that there is need for local teachers to publish textbooks.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

It is concluded that the concept of Appreciative Inquiry works at the classroom level. The feedback has encouraged the researcher to continue using appreciative inquiry in the profession. In anticipation of accomplishing the SDG4 that has to do with Quality Education, the author encourages other educators to employ the appreciative inquiry combined with cooperative learning and the integration of faith and learning. This calls for educators in higher education to publish textbooks that are contextually relevant to the education phenomena in Liberia. Hence, embracing the concept of appreciative inquiry could be an alternative to tackling the challenges that are facing the educational sector in Africa.

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