Appreciative Evaluation within a Conflicted Educational Context[1]

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Draft for *NewDirections in Evaluation, 2004*

Background

This chapter describes the use of Appreciative Inquiry in the evaluation of an academic department at a private high school. Specifically, the evaluation process was commissioned by the Dean of Faculty and the Department Chair to assess two related issues: (1) the department's curriculum and (2) the department's abilities to work collaboratively. The evaluation was part of a school-wide curriculum reform process. The goal was to assess the current curriculum within the department in such a manner that its strengths could be noted and built upon while its weaknesses could be eliminated or at least diminished. To that end, those who might benefit from the evaluation were the department faculty, the students, and ultimately the school.

Evaluation as Social Construction

My view of evaluation, which places emphasis on evaluation as an on-going process, emerges from my social constructionist orientation (Gergen, 1999; McNamee and Gergen, 1999). A good deal has been written about social construction and this chapter is not the place to provide a comprehensive overview of constructionist theory. But briefly, constructionism focuses our attention on the social processes by which people create and maintain realities. This entails focusing on *what people do together*. Consequently, constructionists focus attention on language practices (all embodied activities of persons relating together). Constructionism proposes that the most important aspect of social life is *what people do together* because in their joint actions, people create a world which values certain beliefs and practices. Since we all inhabit many different relationships and communities (not to

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[1] *Evaluation of an academic program using an appreciative approach is described in this chapter. The case illustrates how using the language of strengths, values, and ideals can help participants take stock of their program in order to move what they most value forward in the process of curricular reform and collaborative working relations.*

mention the access we have to worlds we do not literally inhabit through globalization and technological advancement), the potential for constructing very diverse and incompatible ways of being in the world is great. Thus, we should not be surprised when people come together in a context such as the one examined in this chapter, with conflicting values, beliefs and realities. The challenge is one of *coordinating* multiple ways of being and one way to do this is to invite participants into a dialogue where they learn to become curious about each other's differences. This curiosity, in turn, generates a sense of respect for ways of being that are incompatible with one's own. Participants can respect the coherence of another's position while simultaneously disagreeing with it. This respect, in turn, fosters an ability to remain in conversation. And, as constructionists argue, to remain in conversation is to keep the possibility of constructing a reality *together* alive.

Appreciative Inquiry as One Elaboration of Social Construction in Practice

I see Appreciative Inquiry as a useful elaboration of the social construction. If what we *do together* creates the possibilities and constraints within which we live, then how might our realities change if we replace deficit based language – focus on what is not working – with talk of what is working? I am interested in exploring how approaching evaluation from an appreciative stance might invite participants to engage in program improvement and development. I am also interested in exploring how such an approach to evaluation might assist participants in reconstructing their working relationships so that their differences are respected rather than demonized and they value themselves and each other for the specific talents each one offers to their collective program.

Having said this, the question we need to explore is what might we gain by focusing our evaluation on those aspects of programs that we appreciate – those parts that are working, that are valued, and that invite program participants into coordinating a generative future together? I am not interested in claiming that appreciatively oriented evaluation is inherently better than more standard forms of evaluation. Rather, I see appreciative evaluation (i.e., evaluation conducted within the discourse of appreciation and strengths) as a version of formative evaluation; it is evaluation that is conducted with the purpose of improving the program. Further, the evaluation process itself becomes part of the improvement of the program. My interest is in exploring appreciative evaluation as a potentially generative assessment tool by virtue of the propensity of appreciatively oriented conversation to yield creative possibilities for coordination. Thus, it seems to me that programs evaluated within an appreciative frame might ultimately become more human and, by association, more socially useful. The case presented here is only one

small excursion into this issue and by no means is presented as definitive "proof" that appreciative evaluation is better, successful, or more useful. My aim is only to raise questions and open possibilities.

Introduction to the Case

As stated, my aim is to introduce and discuss the use of an appreciative approach to the evaluation of one academic department in a private high school. Taking an appreciative evaluation approach in the current case enabled an emphasis on the resources and strengths of the department and of the current curriculum. It was assumed that this stance might be different enough from former evaluation processes thereby encouraging and enabling the needed transformation/improvement of both curriculum and departmental working style. Curricular problems featured during each previous review included the lack of coherence in assignments from one grade to the next, the pedagogical inconsistency from teacher to teacher, the outdated reading lists, and the on going debates among the faculty concerning programmatic philosophy. These difficulties were, of course, accentuated by a working environment wherein collegial, professional trust and respect were always in question. According to department faculty, "camps" were formed and strategies concocted for making pedagogical and personnel decisions. Each prior evaluation left the department feeling inadequate, overworked, and more entrenched in its divisiveness. Self reports provided by each faculty member, the Department Chair and the Dean of Faculty acknowledged that previous evaluations had not led to any generative programmatic improvement. For this reason, evaluation conducted within an appreciative stance was viewed as potentially useful for the school, the department, the faculty, and ultimately the students.

Yet, while the Department Chair, the Dean and a small number of Departmental faculty were eager to embark upon an evaluative process that was generated within an appreciative context, most of the faculty were reluctant to spend time on any activity that purported to "improve" the functioning of the department (both professionally and interpersonally). Like most long-term working groups, the faculty were deeply settled into their oppositional positions vis a vis each other. The idea of actually spending time (time that would be taken from their families, friends, athletic and club obligations to the school as well as course preparation time) was met with great resistance.

Appreciative Evaluation

To direct the evaluation toward an Appreciative Inquiry into the department's curriculum and working

style, a procedure that included one-on-one interviews followed by a two-day retreat was designed. After initial contact with the Chair of the department to discuss the use of an appreciative approach, I was introduced to the entire faculty at the first meeting of the academic year. During this introduction, I explained that my intention was not to evaluate their program and working style from *my* perspective but rather to invite them into a conversation with me about how best to evaluate their program and their working style as a group. I described my interest in working from discussions of what they value in their program and in their collegial relationships as opposed to engaging in detailed explorations of what was not working or what they did not like. I explained that I understood there already was a good deal of both open and private discussion about problems and their causes. Additionally, I explained that while those sorts of conversations can be useful and often help to clarify and thereby improve a program, this had not been the case for this department (by their own admission). Therefore, my attempt would be to bracket discussions of problems and causality and place the spotlight on how to build on the curricular and collegial *strengths* that already were acknowledged within the program. Further, I explained that my intention was not to find a way to "make them all get along with each other." Rather, my hope was that a byproduct of our collaborative evaluation would be a respect for differences that would promote new ways of coordinating their work activities together in a more generative and harmonious manner. In addition, the department would begin to develop more collaborative, respectful working relations by virtue of their participation in the joint creation of the evaluation. I invited each member of the department to contact me with any further questions, concerns, or suggestions. I immediately began scheduling thirty-minute meetings with each faculty member. Prior to these one-on-one meetings, I sent each person a list of questions upon which to reflect in preparation for our discussion (see Appendix A). These questions were designed to generate reflection *prior* to the interviews. During the interviews, I did not methodically go through the list of questions with each faculty member. Instead, I began each interview by asking faculty to tell me what he or she thought I most needed to know about the Department, the curriculum, and the working relationships of members. I asked each member to describe the department at its best and to comment on the values, strengths, and talents each one, personally, offered to the department. I also asked what values, strengths and talents they imagined their colleagues would associate with their own unique contribution to the program.

As might be expected, my interviews did not omit discussion of departmental or personal problems. Many

faculty seemed to view their interviews with me as a chance to "air" their "side" of the story. This raises an interesting issue for me as a constructionist using Appreciative Inquiry as a method for constructing transformation. Many mistakenly believe that Appreciative Inquiry prohibits all problem talk. In my own experience, prohibiting the very issues that people want to discuss is oppressive and therefore monologic. Sampson (1993) describes monologism as a particular way of engaging with others where one sees the other as separate and in the service of oneself. Dialogism, on the other hand, celebrates the coordination of all participants in the conversation and recognizes the mutual dependence participants have on each other to construct the worlds in which they live. One does not need to be monologic and eliminate all problem talk from the conversation in order to engage in an Appreciative Inquiry. I find that when people feel they have had a chance to tell their story *and* it has been heard, they are very willing to experiment with talking in a different way. In this case, the different talk is appreciative. Thus, when faculty wanted to talk about problems with me, I did not try to redirect the conversation. I was fascinated, given the history of this group, of their difficult interpersonal relationships, and of the fact that I had been hired by the Chair of the department (who was not outside of the fray of hostile histories) that faculty willingly offered detailed accounts of the relational politics within the department. In fact, in one interview I commented on how appreciative I was that everyone was being so honest and trusting me with some very sensitive information. The person I was interviewing at the time responded, "But you told us we should trust you!" As the outside evaluator, this was a very confirming moment and I wonder how much I can credit the trustworthiness I embodied with this group to the time consuming task of meeting each member of the faculty one-on-one. By beginning each interview with my vow to confidentiality and by giving my time to get to know each one personally, I was able to listen to the problems, acknowledge that they had been heard, and move each person on to a discussion of strengths, values, and high points.

It is these strengths, values and high points that remained the focus of my work with the department. I began by pulling out the overlapping themes that emerged from my one-on-one interviews in preparation for the retreat. These themes included: (1) the department's focus on history and tradition vs. change, (2) evaluation of each other as faculty and of students, (3) commitment to a common but broad pedagogical frame vs. teacher's autonomy and independence in the classroom, (4) the decision making process and the need for and meaning of agreement and consensus, (5) what it means to be a good colleague, (6) the unifying power of discussing intellectual

passions, and (7) the need for ritualistic celebration of each other's achievements. These themes re-emerged during the retreat working sessions and will be discussed later in this chapter.

Immediately before the retreat, faculty were asked to reflect on additional issues in order to prepare them for work on evaluating their current curriculum and working style. These issues, beyond preparing them to engage in the evaluation that would transpire at the retreat, were designed to orient the group toward a collaborative mode of work. Expanding the typical application of Appreciative Inquiry, faculty were asked to think about and be ready to share their personal statement of teaching. To assist them in this task, they were given the following questions: (1) How did you come into the profession of teaching? What captured your imagination about this life choice? (2) What drew you to the idea of working with students? (3) What ideas did you have about working with colleagues? (4) What attracted you to this particular school? (5) How would you describe your overall teaching objectives and goals? and (6) Provide an anecdote or story that will capture for the group your teaching methods.

These questions were designed to spark stories of high points (as in a typical Appreciative Inquiry). However, the high points were not about the department or school as a whole but were about each faculty member's own passion for teaching. Consistent with Appreciative Inquiry, the assumption was made that sharing stories of one's own love and excitement about teaching could serve as an initiation into a different and transformative conversation among colleagues. This is contrasted to a more standard inquiry into one's teaching philosophy that would generally yield a set of abstract principles. The stories each member told gave life and coherence to what would otherwise be disembodied knowledge.

The Retreat

Prior to selecting someone to conduct the evaluation for this group, the Chair had announced to the faculty that they would be required to participate in a three-day retreat in the fall. The purpose of this retreat was to evaluate their program and working style. The retreat was held at a resort on the beach with many recreational facilities such as golfing, tennis, and beautiful walking paths. The retreat began on Sunday afternoon and ended with lunch on Tuesday. Most faculty were quite clear in their interviews with me that either they felt the retreat would be a waste of their time or that they were willing to attend but would be exceedingly upset if the end product of the retreat was not a new curriculum or some concrete movement towards one. The general sentiment was that being sequestered away from family, teaching obligations, and extracurricular responsibilities was going beyond

normal expectations for the job. (Each faculty member, by school design, coaches or directs some extra-curricular activity and this retreat interfered with several athletic "play off" games.) The majority of the faculty resented the idea of the retreat. Many were willing to go but were also ready to resent being forced into this activity if it turned out to be another situation where a lot of good conversation transpired with no subsequent action. The Department Chair had cancelled all classes for the day on Monday as well as for Tuesday morning. This could have been an additional difficulty for those faculty who felt they were losing precious classroom time. The majority did not share the Chair's idea that this would be a relaxing benefit for the faculty.

The design of the retreat was generated in collaboration with the Department's Self Study Subcommittee. This subcommittee was appointed as part of the School-wide curriculum assessment procedure. Each department had their own working subcommittee focused on the details of their own departments. These subcommittees would meet together periodically to discuss the broader issues of the School-wide curriculum. The Department's subcommittee had been meeting for several months and had gathered numerous documents to review in assessing and re-designing their curriculum. As the evaluator hired to conduct the overall evaluation of both the department's curriculum and working style, I assumed that my job required coordination with the Self Study Subcommittee since they were already engaged in the process of evaluating the departmental curriculum. Several weeks prior to the retreat, we collaborated in designing that time together in such a way that the materials and issues generated by the Self Study Subcommittee were integrated with the issues generated in my interviews with faculty. The design focused on central questions. The following sections identify the questions and topics in the order in which they were discussed. The summary of each discussion is included here rather than later in a "results" section for coherence.

Setting the context. During the opening portion of the retreat, faculty were asked to share the story of how they entered into the profession of teaching. The story telling took over two hours and created an atmosphere of respect and interest, as well as it offered a good deal of humor. After a dinner break, the conversation continued.

Who are we and who can we become? Drawing on the personal stories of teaching, I invited the faculty to select someone else in the group (preferably someone with whom they typically have little interaction) and interview each other about high points in teaching (Tell me a story about a highpoint for you as a teacher) as well as about the values and strengths about themselves as teachers that their stories reflected (As you tell that story, what are you

reminded of as your own values and strengths?). In relation to the Four D Model, this activity would be considered the "Discovery" phase of an Appreciative Inquiry (i.e., appreciating that which gives life).

Each pair found a comfortable corner in the large room within which we were working to conduct the interviews. When the interviews were completed (about 45 minutes), the group reconvened and each pair reported the values and strengths that had been identified through the stories told. There was no need to share the actual stories that each faculty member narrated because the values and strengths that each person identified him or herself as having comprised the significant content with which the group could work for the remainder of the retreat. For this reason, I created a list on newsprint as each pair shared the values and strengths that had emerged in their conversation. This list was incorporated in the final report. In this manner, the faculty had a written record of their collective, personal strengths and values.

The faculty described many strengths and talents amongst themselves (see Appendix B). They reported valuing each other mostly for the commitment and passion each brings to teaching. They agreed that the integrity and quality of the student-teacher relationship is of central concern to them all. In general, the faculty described themselves at their best when talking about their academic work. Additionally, there was agreement that they are most energized when exchanging ideas and innovations for teaching, classroom exercises, assignments, and projects. The image that emerged was one of a group of people who love what they do for a living and enjoy the chance to share their ideas with each other.

Describe the features that would help you create an ideal curriculum. A brainstorming session followed the discussion of values, strengths and talents. The idea here was to build upon the identified attributes in fantasizing specific features that would help create the ideal curriculum and working relationships. Here, we moved into the "Dream" phase of Appreciative Inquiry (envisioning what might be). Participants were invited to call out the features that would help them create an ideal curriculum. Their ideas were listed, again, on newsprint and integrated into the final report for their future use.

Several areas were identified (for full list, see Appendix C): curricular, structural aspects of the program, physical resources, human resources, and School policy. The general tenor of the conversation articulated the need for departmental teaching to have ample time, commitment, and one-on-one contact between student and teacher. A central feature of the ideal curriculum would be constant and active revision of students' work urged on by teacher

and peer commentary/feedback. The faculty ideally envisioned a program that reached beyond the mechanics of the discipline and engaged students by integrating their own experiences.

The curriculum: Where do we want to be? What is the ideal curriculum for this School? At the start of the next day, we moved from the dream phase to the "design" phase of our inquiry. Faculty worked in five separate groups (quasi-randomly assigned) to co-construct their future. Luckily, there were five faculty who were new to the department at the time of the retreat. Since these five had not yet been acculturated into the political and philosophical divisions in the department, I invited them to each serve as a representative of a different group. I asked each of the five to randomly draw names from a hat, thereby indicated group membership. It was interesting to me to note how much *all* the faculty liked this technique for forming working groups. I connected it with a ritual I had been told about in the department wherein the youngest member of the faculty would light the fire at the first faculty party in the fall. However, given a number of unfortunate circumstances, there had not been a full faculty party for several years. In introducing the five newest and youngest members of the faculty to draw names for the group composition, I described the process as my attempt to maintain the ritual within the department. I think the randomness of the group formation relieved many warring faculty. Yet, I also think that integrating the new with the old (new members leading older members, as well as a new procedure following an old ritual) opened a space where faculty could all be genuinely together.

Each group was instructed to find a comfortable space and brainstorm an answer to the following question: What is the ideal program for this school? Round tables for working, flip charts and markers were provided. In order to get the conversation going, groups were given the following instructions: (1) suspend any existing notions of structure (i.e., do not assume that the class schedule or current sequencing of courses are in place since anything could change by virtue of the curriculum revisions currently under discussion), (2) really try to think beyond what exists, what has been done in the past, or what you think someone might think you should be doing, (3) think about what is really important to teach students, (4) think about what is essential, and (5) think about what could fit any specific curricular design. The discussion took approximately one hour.

The five plans were presented after lunch. Each group, in turn, provided an overview of the plan they had designed for the *ideal curriculum*. Debate and/or discussion of plans was not allowed but all were encouraged to ask questions to gain further information and clarification. After all five ideal programs were presented, five *newly*

formed groups worked on developing an integration of these five. Each group had a representative from each of the five original groups. Thus, each of the new groups had one member who could speak directly to each plan. Groups were instructed to select, merge, integrate, synthesize, discard, etc the five working plans into one. Materials and documents about the current program (documents written for previous reviews and for school publicity) as well as documents generated by the self-study committee were available for use if needed/desired. This discussion yielded five proposed *integrated ideal plans*. Each of these was presented in the same format as the first plans were presented. This was followed by a whole group discussion of the ideal plans that resulted in one integrated design (largely due to the fact that each integrated plan was quite similar). The faculty realized, through this process, that their images of their program were not as disparate as they had believed.

Integration of ideal curriculum - creating a plan of action. The ideal program embraced several core commitments that were reflective of the values and strengths faculty had identified in the first session of the retreat (see Appendix A). Their commitments were to teaching and high expectations for students' work. Central to these commitments was opportunity for close student-teacher engagement, teaching a diverse range of subtopics, and daily writing that would serve several purposes (e.g., self knowledge, discovery, understanding of deadlines, and so forth). The curriculum in the ideal program embodied several necessary elements relevant to classroom management, student skill acquisition, and assignments (see Appendix D).

The structure of the ideal curriculum focused on issues of classroom management, resources that would enhance teaching, the school and the Department structure, as well as assignments/grading. Some of the highlights included a reduced teaching load thereby allowing for student conference time, creation of a computer/working lab, and narrative assessment (as opposed to letter or numerical grades).

In addition, faculty were interested in exploring (and having the time to explore) the centrality of teaching various topics and employing a range of pedagogical methods. Specifically, the need for an extended conversation on what count as useful pedagogies was emphasized. Members of the department defined teaching methods differently. It was only in the context of appreciative, interested inquiry that members of the department learned that what they previously thought were distinct philosophical and practical distinctions were actually issues around which they were in complete agreement with each other. Agreement was reached that discussion about these perceived differences would be necessary as the faculty worked toward evaluating and improving their curriculum.

Relatedly, the issue of teacher autonomy and what it means to value autonomy was raised. This issue seemed to touch on the heart of the communication issues in the department. Significant topics were brought to the table such as what is lost and what is gained in celebrating autonomy, how teachers' autonomy is beneficial (or not) for students, how autonomy figures in pre-tenure evaluations, and the relationship between autonomy and trust. In the ideal curriculum, the issue of autonomy would be openly discussed and clarified.

Faculty agreed that, also in their ideal curriculum, there would be ample time for teaching and working with students. They would have a common vocabulary worked out so that they could provide students with consistency as they move through the curriculum. And finally, faculty agreed that the ideal program would have clarity concerning the connection between the various aspects of the discipline.

Committing to the next steps. On the final morning, the synthesis of the discussion detailed above (concerning the plan of action) was distributed to the faculty. In general, this synthesis represented a sense of commitment and agreement by the faculty thereby serving as an organizing and orienting guide for refining the current curriculum. The recurrent themes that had emerged in my one-on-one interviews with each faculty member were presented to the group at this time. This presentation and open discussion was intended to offer the opportunity for the group to publicly acknowledge issues that were relevant to the evaluation of both the curriculum and their working relations. It was important for the faculty to consider the recurrent themes as they developed concrete ways in which to use the information emerging from our collaborative evaluation in the development of their curriculum and more effective working relationships. The emergent themes were acknowledged by the group as on-going issues within the department and therefore as importantly connected to the current challenges of re-designing the curriculum as well as the group's work style. This open discussion led to a concluding session where the faculty committed to a specific set of actions.

Actions agreed upon at the close of the retreat. The final phase of the retreat embraced the "delivery" phase of Appreciative Inquiry. Here, faculty engaged in a conversation about *how* to real-ize (i.e., make real) the program they imagined. The faculty agreed to four immediate "next steps" as a result of having engaged in the appreciative evaluation. These next steps included (1) creating a committee to explore the evaluation and tenure process and draft proposed alterations to the process; (2) initiating on-going classroom observations where the resulting suggestions for individual faculty members' teaching and for the departmental curriculum would be

actively discussed; (3) creating an Agenda Committee to prioritize actions, ideas, and discussions that emerged from the retreat; and (4) committing to direct communication with each other concerning professional and/or personal concerns.

Reflections on the Process of Appreciative Evaluation

We can easily see from the action steps agreed upon at the end of the evaluation process that the faculty had come to a collective understanding of their curriculum and a vision of where they should be heading. This is not to suggest that there was absolute agreement about the curriculum nor about how they work together as a group. However, the themes that emerged in my one-on-one interviews echoed throughout the retreat discussions (throughout the evaluation) and seemed to open the possibility for new conversations and new ways of constructing a strong curriculum.

As for evaluating the working relationships among the faculty, the evaluation process engaged them in not only new conversations (e.g., conversations about what they value, what works, and what they see as strengths in each other and their curriculum) but also in new *ways* to be in conversation with each other. The stories told at the start of the retreat provided a dramatically different context within which colleagues could discuss what had previously been a difficult topic (e.g., their curriculum). Each person was invited in to each other's passion and joy for teaching. Each was given the opportunity to recognize similarities between self and other. Each was afforded the chance to see the other in a frame that differed dramatically from the distrusting and disrespectful frame of everyday departmental activities.

The results of this very different conversation, this very different approach to program evaluation, were identified in follow-up conversations with the faculty. They reported that their perceived differences were actually smaller than they imagined. They also reported that the process of examining their curriculum in the manner we did allowed them the opportunity to engage with each other in ways that were new and useful. Rather than making negative judgmental assessments of their curriculum or their working style (or of each other!), they engaged in conversations that were effectively *different*. They were taking stock of (evaluating) what worked, what they valued, what their strengths were.

After providing a report to the Dean of Faculty, the Department Chair, and each faculty member, I met with the Dean and Chair to discuss their responses to the summary of the retreat. This discussion began a dialogue

concerning the ways in which the school's administration could assist the department in making the desired changes. Follow up conversations with the Department Chair and the faculty indicate that they have developed new procedures for faculty evaluation and are in the process of trying out these procedures. They report that the annual faculty evaluation has taken on a exciting new tenor because of the conversations they have had, the procedures with which they are experimenting, and the feeling that this process is on-going and flexible. As part of the process of peer evaluation and also of curriculum development, the faculty have initiated classroom observation and feedback sessions. In discussing feedback from faculty, they report a more collegial sense of the annual review process. While time will tell, my sense is that the simple act of openly discussing the review procedures has changed the way in which both senior and junior faculty approach evaluative reviews. They report on-going conversations to alter the actual method of review, but to this point, the methods appear the same but the experience is different. These discussions also yield generative cross talk concerning pedagogical issues such as course content, course sequencing, and teaching styles, thereby assisting in the further development of the "ideal" curriculum. The department also reports that they have a well functioning agenda committee that reviews all issues within the department's operation and prioritizes discussions and actions among the faculty. The combination of these three actions (all agreed upon at the close of the evaluation retreat) have assisted the department in realizing (thus far) their forth action goal: direct communication with each other concerning professional and personal concerns. It seems that the *different* conversations – conversations that were initiated with personal stories and developed into dialogue about strengths, values, and ideals – helped to create different ways of interacting among the faculty. While they assessed their working relationships and style of working in negative terms prior to this evuation, they now have a more inspired assessment of who they are as a group and how they work together. In effect, they report respecting disagreements on issues and becoming curious rather than judgmental about them.

Appreciative Evaluation: Pros and Cons

Appreciative evaluation commonly is critiqued because it is believed to ignore problems with a program. Yet, the fact is, problems and weaknesses are much easier to address when evaluation takes an appreciative stance. Since appreciatively oriented evaluation begins by taking stock of resources, values, and strengths, those participating in the evaluation feel better equipped to address difficulties and problems. Often, what have appeared to be immutable problems (such as the lack of trust and respect among the faculty in this case study) are viewed

within a context of possibility rather than failure. Evaluation that emanates from an appreciative stance does not have to ignore aspects of programs that are not working well - the point is not to avoid such topics but rather to mine the resources and strengths that are part of the program in order to improve upon or in some way alter the parts that are not working.

In addition, and as this case suggests, evaluation from an appreciative stance can facilitate collaboration among participants. Appreciatively oriented evaluation provides a means for the collaborative construction of what will count as success thereby avoiding some predetermined measure of success that may or may not resonate with what is going on in the program. In this department, the very ability to create an ideal curriculum allowed the faculty to generate the standards by which they would both evaluate students and be evaluated themselves. As discussed above, both of these issues were difficult ones for the department and had histories that created a great deal of tension within the group. By building on strengths, resources, and ideals, participants felt free to “experiment” with the process of evaluation (which they are currently doing). The notion that there had to be a preset standard by which to judge their competencies as teachers or the competencies of their students was at least temporarily suspended. This suspension has allowed a continual creativity to circulate within the department. This is not to suggest that the determination of criteria for assessment is never appropriate. Rather, as this faculty works through the conversation about their curriculum and their working relations, the acceptance of fluid, evolving criteria appears to be more generative. Finally, it is important to note that appreciatively oriented evaluation is not devoid of judgments. Rather, it invites judgment of what is happening within a frame of "how can we make this better" or "what can we do together to make this work." In sum, this case is suggestive of the potential for appreciative evaluation to enhance program improvement by virtue of the different conversations it invites among program participants.

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Appendix A

I appreciate your taking the time to meet with me before the retreat so that we can get to know each other. Additionally, it is important to me that I have the chance to understand how you see the current curricular issues you confront, the situation within your department, as well as within the School, in general. Please feel free to share with me anything that you think might be useful in reaching the goal of the retreat.

Before we meet, I thought it might be useful for you to think about some of the general issues about which I will be asking. Feel free to think about answers to the following questions. Use these questions in whatever way you find useful.

1. How would you characterize yourself, as a member of this department? Can you describe your relationship to the department and to the School? If you can think of a story that conveys who you are in these relationships, that would be useful to me in understanding you and your relationships with the group.

2. Have you heard or experienced conversations within the School – at any level – related to how your department operates and envisions itself, that have been especially constructive? What do you think made these conversations constructive? Additionally, what does the usual conversation within the department (about *how* to be a department) focus on? What topics, questions, or information are usually avoided or excluded, which are useful, etc.?

3. As you think about the retreat, what could happen there that would lead you to feel that your participation was worthwhile and what could happen afterwards that would make you happy to have been part of the group discussion? What do you most care that I keep in mind during the retreat? From your perspective, what topics are most important for discussion during the retreat (to make it successful)?

4. What might be set in place to enable you to speak as fully as you wish at the retreat? Can you suggest any guidelines for communicating that represent your own commitments to speak and listen in ways that support the general purpose of the retreat?

5. What do you want your colleagues to understand about who you are and what you most care about around the issue of department identity and practice? What questions do you hope that others might ask you? What do you really want to understand about your departmental colleagues and their concerns? What might you ask others in order to get some clarity about these things?

6. Do you have any further questions or comments for me?

APPENDIX B

Strengths, Values, and Talents of the Department Faculty

Listed below are the terms that were generated during the retreat in response to the question of strengths, values, and talents. Answers are clustered into three areas: strengths, values and talents of the faculty (1) as professionals, (2) in relation to students, and (3) in relation to each other as colleagues.

I. As faculty/professionals

a. passionate learners
b. appreciate power of personal stories
c. teach students to observe their place in the world
d. willingness to travel where students take us
e. communicative enthusiasm (without taking over)
F. teach integrity to each other and to our students
g. thoughtful editing
h. not fixated on specific genres
i. not content oriented
j. open and flexible
k. value students as multidimensional (holistic appreciation of students)
l. privilege process of engaging with a text
m. dedicated to doing best for students
n. fine sense of humor
o. willingness to give to students
p. diversity of experiences (as a department faculty)
q. willing to take emotional and intellectual chances
r. creativity in teaching
s. like adolescents
t. appreciate the surprise of adolescence
u. not indulgent to the students
v.respectfulness for new ideas/vocation (from a sense of deep seated self confidence)

II. In relation to students

a. try to hear - pay attention to what students are saying
b. get kids to go beyond their expectations
c. appreciate power of personal stories
d. teach students to observe their place in the world
e. willingness to travel where students take us
f. communicative enthusiasm (without taking over)
g. teach integrity to our students
h. thoughtful editing
i. close readers for students
j. open and flexible
k. value students as multidimensional (holistic appreciation of students)
l. empower students through our teaching method
m. privilege process of engaging with a text
n. let students explore diversity (through personal narrative)
o.dedicated to doing best for students

III. In relation to each other as colleagues

a. control academic egos
b. listen
c. generous with each other re: teaching - share well
d. appreciate power of personal stories

e. talking about texts (as colleagues – we listen to each other)
f. colleagues who practice what we ask our students to practice
g. teach integrity to each other
h. close readers for each other
i. open and flexible
j. ability to jar each other out of complacency
k. best when not insular - comfortable place to be - open door

APPENDIX C
Central Features of an Ideal Program

I. Curricular Issues

- Students would write all the time
- Faculty would give immediate feedback all the time
- Experiential education beyond the classroom
- Classroom - life connection – service learning
- Student radio show (service learning) – "Reporter at Large" as a genre
- Emersion experience in one topic/discipline

II. Structural Aspects

- Opportunity to meet with students as many hours as needed
- No email/voicemail used to conduct our work
- Email used for the majority of our business
- Find a way to realize the ideal

III.Resources (space and equipment)

- Everyone has own classroom
- Common room w/fireplace - that would fit everyone
- Everyone has their own computer
- Departmental library
- State of the art DVD - theater
- Department facility for editing DVD

IV.Human Resources

- Departmental secretary

V.School Policies

- No tenure
- On-going evaluation and accountability
- Fat blocks (longer teaching formats)
- Three classes a week
- No letter grades - narrative feedback
- Free weekends
- Interdisciplinary opportunities
- School would create and honor time for reflection
- Stronger commitment to faculty enrichment

APPENDIX D

The specific issues identified as central to the ideal writing program as listed below.

I. Philosophy: The Department is committed to the following: *Risk taking, originality, ambition, imagination*

A. Core Commitments

1. *In teaching*
   - All genres/all ages
   - Process, continuity, patience
   - "The teaching of writing document" (Summer, 2002)
   - Continuity – building not overlap
   - Student-centered (meeting students where they are)
   - Individual attention
   - Diversity of methodology, flexibility, autonomy
   - Exposure to different genres/modes at each level
   - Appreciation for the uniqueness of pedagogy's own calendar
   - Extensive feedback

2. *In students' works*
   - Writing efficiently to deadline
   - Writing for self knowledge
   - Writing as habit of discovery (breathing) – thinking
   - Writing every day
   - Growth is greater than grades
   - Reflection
   - Engage in process
   - Sensitivity to audience/communication skills and strategies

II. Elements of the Curriculum

A. Necessary elements

1. *Related to Classroom Management*
   - Portion of class time devoted to writing
   - Individual attention
   - Time for conferences
   - Frequency of writing and feedback (more time for both)
   - Timeliness of feedback
   - Flexibility
   - Provide models
   - Writing intensive courses

2. *Related to Students' Skill Acquisition*
   - Thoughtful editing
   - Revision
   - Elements of
   - Subtle skill (word choice, organic source, metaphor)
   - Various modes of expression
   - Seeing
   - Audience
   - Voice
   - Versatility

3. *Related to Students' Assignments*
   - Writing and pre-writing
   - Portfolio, exhibition

B. Useful elements
   1. Poetry collection
   2. Roots paper
   3. Meditation

III. Structure of curriculum
   A. Related to Classroom Management
      1. Ample time for conferences with students
      2. 3 sections per teacher
      3. A list of writing assignments similar to the list of texts
      4. Service learning
      5. Additional writing elective available all terms
      6. Develop writing course

   B. Related to Resources that would enhance teaching
      1. Use of computer/writing center
      2. Senior tutors of others in a writing center

   C. Related to the School and Department Structure
      1. Time to get papers back in a week
      2. Fewer students (via fewer class meetings?)
      3. 1 week block modules (not Saturday) - 90 min-2 hours
      4. Longer format/class periods
      5. Different structure for senior year
      6. Lighter load for some teachers to fill in for illness,etc.
      7. Writing course teachers teach a lighter load
      8. Free weekends

   D. Related to Assignments and Grading
      1. Written assessment not letter grades
      2. Variety of work
      3. Senior project with evaluations

IV. Remaining questions/issues
   A. Curricular Goals of the Department
      1. *To teach students in the following genres*
         - Analysis
         - Exposition
         - Narration
           –need a conversation about what we mean by "narrative"
           –narrative as a set of rules vs. narrative as
           –consistent with student-centered pedagogy
           –role of narrative (writing in their own voice)
           –in all forms of writing
           –is narrative a "foundation to build on" or a
           –"formula to be true to"
           –discuss "old guard" and "new guard" views on the
           –meaning of narrative

2. *To refine students' skills in*
   - Grammar and mechanics
   - Structure

3. *To clearly define our program*

B. Consequences of teacher autonomy

1. *What do we mean when we say we value autonomy?*
   - There is a huge level of trust
   - What do we lose or what could we lose in our celebration of
     - –autonomy?
     - –students experience moving through department as
     - –arbitrary - no sense that they will need what
     - –they learn in future classes
     - –no consistent set of signals as to what is important
   - What do we gain in our celebration of autonomy?
     - –some focus on nuts and bolts
     - –some focus on content
     - –some focus on style
   - Each of our ways of teaching may give students new options –
     - –not formulaic but authentic ways of approaching
     - –writing - gives them more choices
   - Perhaps we don't articulate our expectations clearly enough
     - –for the students

C. Issues of time

1. Our need for teaching time
2. Students' needs for writing process time

D. Vocabulary issues

1. Need to articulate to students what they are learning using some common terminology

E. Respect for professionalism

1. Trust that we meet students where they are, attend to their needs at whatever level