“When you’re in ‘the depths of despair,’ after a particularly bad day at school, do you really want to think about it anymore and rehash what went wrong?”

After reading this statement in a reflection written by one of the foreign language teacher candidates in my MEd seminar this fall, my heart sank. She raised a good point; if reflecting on one’s failures can be self-defeating, why do it? Given the tone of some of the other reflective essays from that week, I started to wonder if more of my students were interpreting the reflection process as an opportunity to wallow in “the depths of despair.” I decided it was time for a discussion.

At our next class meeting, I shared the above quote (anonymously) with the candidates. As I suspected, multiple heads nodded in agreement. Someone piped up, “When I have a bad day [in my placement], all I want to do is lie on the couch and drink wine.” Someone else added, “Or eat ice cream.”

After a few more remarks led the candidates to jokingly decide that perhaps the optimal solution would be ice cream with wine in it, I realized that I should redirect their attention to a new thought: What if we concentrated our reflections on what went well in the classroom? Using tenets of an action research methodology known as Appreciative Inquiry (AI), I refocused their approach to reflecting on teaching.

Basics of Appreciative Inquiry

AI is concisely defined as “the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them” (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) and it allows participants in the process to reflect on “positive successes in the past to envision positive future outcomes” (Calabrese et al., 2008). While AI methods were initially used in hospitals and companies, recent studies have shown its effectiveness in K–16 level educational settings, including the mentoring of pre-service teachers. While engaging in AI, participants are first encouraged to reflect on their past “highpoint experiences,” and then hypothesize how they might replicate those occurrences to produce similar successes in the future. The backbone of the AI process is the use of the 4-D Cycle, so named for its four phases: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny.

Through a series of positively framed questions, the 4-D Cycle encourages participants to discover and develop their positive core strengths. According to Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros, in the Discovery phase, individuals reflect on the “best of what is.” In the Dream phase, they imagine “what might be.” In the Design phase, they define “what should be,” and in the final Destiny phase, they outline “what will be.”

Elements of the Cycle can be used to guide pre-service teachers toward examining the factors that contribute to their effectiveness in the classroom, rather than solely focusing their thoughts on what went wrong. As such, they are able to consciously construct their future teaching practice based on their positive core strengths and past successes.

Appreciative Inquiry to Spark the Reflection Process

In order to encourage my teacher candidates to accentuate the positive when reflecting on their teaching experiences, I have incorporated the first three components of the AI 4-D Cycle into various class activities. For example, early in the program, I use an AI-based activity to set the tone for the work the candidates will undertake throughout the ensuing 12 months. I begin by asking the candidates a “Dream” phase question, “If someone were to walk into your classroom, what are five words or phrases you would want him or her to use to describe what s/he sees?”

After two minutes of individual reflection about the prompt, the candidates reassemble in pairs, and are instructed to develop five new words/phrases/metaphors between them. After 5 minutes of collective brainstorming, the candidates read their answers to me and I create a word cloud. While they read their responses out loud, there are often frequent interjections of, “Oh, that’s a good one,” and “Did you mean X when you said Y?” which spark new, positively focused discussions about teaching. The resulting word cloud (created with wordle.net) visually captures the positive traits the candidates anticipate will be palpable in their classrooms.
Next, we use the word cloud graphic to ground our earliest reflective discussions. After the students write and teach their first lesson plans to peers, I ask them to complete the following sentences by using words from the word cloud and then share their responses within small peer groups:

1. This week, my lesson was __________, __________, and __________.
2. My goal is for my next lesson to be __________, __________, and __________.
3. I will develop a lesson plan that reflects the description above by __________.

Although candidates may not feel incredibly confident about the implementation of their first lessons, sentences 1 and 2 (representative of the “Discovery” and “Dream” phases) encourage them to discover that something in their lesson went well, and allow them to identify specific qualities they would like to see in their next lesson. Sentence 3 of this structure provides candidates with an opportunity to begin to articulate (or “Design”) specific steps they can take in order to reach the goals identified in sentence 2. In my experience, many candidates often struggle to describe their lessons beyond “good” or “bad” in their first reflections, and the word cloud provides them with an expansive bank of adjectives, or encourages them to find additional adjectives that are applicable to their particular lesson.

**Appreciating the Positive**

At the midterm point of their student teaching experience (usually when the “going gets tough”), I ask candidates to reflect on the following three questions:

1. In thinking back on your teaching experiences thus far, what do you feel are two (or more!) of your current strengths as a teacher? [Discovery Phase]
2. Looking ahead, what are two areas/skills in which you would like to improve your abilities as a teacher? [Dream Phase]
3. What are two specific steps that you can take right now in order to begin to improve your abilities in the areas/skills you noted above in question 2? [Design Phase]

After allowing the candidates a few minutes to respond in writing, they line up in two lines and are given 2 minutes to share their answers with a partner before switching to a new partner. The benefits of this activity are significant. In our post-activity discussions, candidates have expressed that sharing their strengths with others increased their confidence, and it was helpful to know that their peers shared similar goals for improvement. At the conclusion of the activity, I collect the responses. For those candidates who I supervise in their student teaching placements, we revisit their answers as part of our remaining post-observation conferences. These conversations are representative of the “Destiny” phase, as the candidates further plan and act upon “what will be.” If candidates are not making sufficient progress toward the specified goals, we collaboratively refine their course of action and identify resources to assist them. For those who do achieve their goals, we brainstorm strategies for how they can sustain their newfound success as they prepare to embark into new teaching contexts.

After one class, a rather reserved candidate stayed behind to tell me the partner activity was “the best activity we’d done all semester” and she “really enjoyed it.” My own confidence in the AI process was boosted when this candidate was compelled to comment.

**Focus on the Positive**

As practicing teachers know, the process of reflection does not end with student teaching. However, when teachers reflect on their practices, there is potential danger that they will produce a series of complaints or misdirected blame disguised as reflection. Incorporating an AI approach into teachers’ reflective processes can help to reduce gravitation toward the negative by centering thoughts on the positive. AI-based reflections increase teachers’ confidence by reaffirming what they are doing well and they are able to further improve their effectiveness in the classroom by developing from a standpoint of success rather than deficit.

As for my students who may have been Googling “Cabernet Gelato” during the conversation mentioned above, I am happy to say that the general mood within the cohort lifted following a “Discovery/Dream-based”
Step Three: Pursue Progress

As the year is progressing and things are falling into place, continue taking an active role in your professional development. Level 1 starts with you. What resources can you read and research to support your own learning? Start by reading *The Essentials of World Languages, Grades K–12 Effective Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment* by Jensen and Sandrock with Franklin (2007) and *Teacher’s Handbook: Contextualized Language Instruction, 4th Edition* by Shrum and Glisan (2009). These resources can provide you with a comprehensive introduction to best practices in the world language classroom.

As you continue your journey, the Keys series published by ACTFL can provide you with a more in-depth study to each element of the classroom: *The Keys to the Classroom* (Patrick, 2007), *The Keys to Assessing Language Performance* (Sandrock, 2010), and *The Keys to Planning for Learning* (Clementi & Terrill, 2013).

Level 2 is connecting to local resources. Contact your neighboring schools and ask if there is a cohort of supervisors in your role. If not, offer to host the first meeting. Find a mentor outside of your building that you can use as a resource. It’s always helpful to have a lifeline that is removed from the personal connections.

Level 3 is more global. Seek out professional organizations like ACTFL and your state organization. These are great resources that can be shared with your staff and that also make professional development more accessible. Sign up for their newsletters and publications. These are valuable resources and timely reminders to keep you in touch with best practices.

As you progress in your learning, you will begin to feel more confident in your understanding of second language education. Your staff will also start to feel more confident in your future leadership. Success beyond your first year is dependent upon your commitment to the process. Just as we encourage our staff, modeling lifelong learning starts with us. Over time, it’s important to start thinking of yourself as a language educator in addition to an administrator—because if you don’t, they never will.

Nicholas Gehl is Department Chair of Fine Arts, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, IL.

References
