



# CREATING HIGHLY INTERACTIVE ONLINE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

## Case Study: Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

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### This case study covers:

- ✓ eLearning
- ✓ Revenue generation
- ✓ Associations

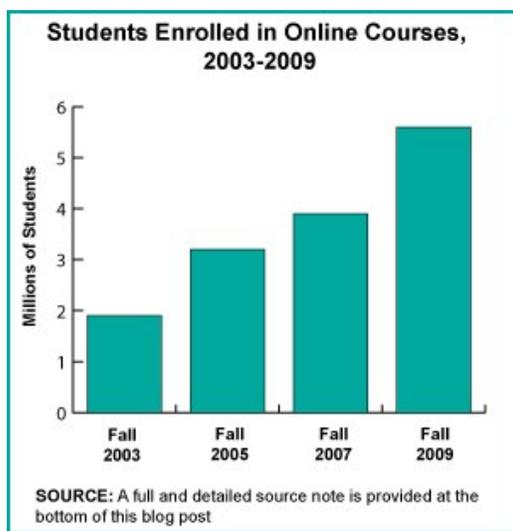
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## Introduction

In the mid 1980s, the computer was rapidly gaining popularity as a household product. The introduction of the microprocessor and new efficient software had transformed the computer from an expensive, unwieldy machine used primarily by academic or research institutions to an affordable, yet valuable technology with enormous potential. However, even in the midst of these developments, it would still be many years until ambitious thinkers would consider the possibility of using computers to migrate professional development from universities and HR departments to new, virtual venues.

Not until the 2000s, with the dramatic upsurge of online activity for everything from social networking to e-commerce, did the world of online professional development really begin to take off. In the fall of 2003, almost 2 million students were enrolled in an online course. By 2009, this figure had tripled to 6 million.



*“Nowadays, the entire workforce goes online not for their jobs, but just as a part of daily life. There is an acceptance, and even more than that, an expectation that learning and professional development will be delivered through online venues.”*  
—Pascal Kaplan, CEO, iCohere

As collaborative technologies grew more sophisticated, it became possible to create online learning environments that brought together all the elements of a physical, face-to-face classroom while bolstering learning and networking opportunities. In an online learning community, learners can engage in cooperative processes that support individual, group, and organization objectives, including professional development, continuing education, and accreditation training.

Today, e-Learning has emerged as a compelling alternative to traditional in-person learning, capable of reducing delivery costs and generating increased revenue through diversified educational offerings.

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) workshop is one example of a successful venture into the e-Learning field. AI teaches strength-based organizational development by focusing on how to tap into an organization’s positive core of strengths. During the 6-week AI online workshop, participants underwent an intense immersion into the AI methodology through the Kolb’s Learning Cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualizing, and active experimentation.

Every week online, students viewed pre-recorded presentations by AI founder David Cooperrider, completed readings and video assignments about AI projects around the world, worked through relevant homework assignments, attended a live web meeting with David Cooperrider and their classmates, and participated in online discussions with workshop co-facilitators Lindsey Godwin and Pascal Kaplan. At the end of the workshop, students received a certificate of completion and came away with a deeper understanding of the AI approach and how to leverage it in their everyday lives.

	<b>AI</b>
<b>Workshop</b>	Appreciative Inquiry
<b>Length</b>	Six weeks (repeated 2-3 times a year)
<b>Registrations</b>	100
<b>Standard Fee</b>	\$1,495
<b>Participants From</b>	Canada, Chile, France, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, United Kingdom
<b>Target Audience</b>	Professionals learning appreciative inquiry methodologies for organizational development
<b>Overall Goal</b>	- Translate a face-to-face learning experience into an immersive and meaningful virtual online environment
<b>Results</b>	- High satisfaction ratings - 4,004 total log-ins - 309,119 total minutes spent on the site
<b>Live Sessions</b>	6
<b>Pre-Recordings</b>	15

*“Working with AI these last number of weeks has been a huge source of comfort for me. It has provided a process for looking at what I want my present and future to be... I have every intention of making AI an integral part of my personal and professional reflection.”*  
*–Workshop participant*

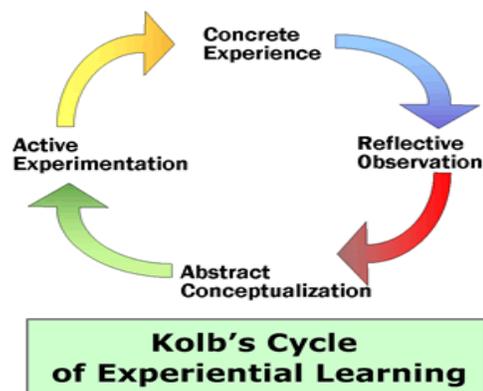


image by Karin Kirk

## Key Challenges

The greatest challenge in designing the AI online workshop was figuring out how to translate a face-to-face learning experience into a vibrant and immersive virtual online environment. Studying in an online sphere can often feel more impersonal and intimidating than studying in a traditional classroom setting. Due to the nature of Appreciative Inquiry, which encourages building a constructive, positive community, it was especially important that workshop participants could feel comfortably engaged, even while at their computers. To inspire people to adopt the Appreciative Inquiry approach in their own lives, the workshop had to, in a short amount of time, ingrain the concepts into participants in a meaningful and lasting way.

## Solution and Results

<b>Workshop Project Plan</b>	November	December	January	February	March	April	May	June
Design & Planning								
Speaker Communications								
Attendee Communications								
Registration								
Marketing								
Content Development								
Site Configuration								
Event Facilitation								
Debrief/Analysis								
Certificate Processing/Awards								

*Project plan for the 6-week AI workshop*

A key success factor in the AI workshop was the creation of a detailed workshop plan. 6 months before the workshop was set to launch, the AI team defined clear objectives and designed their workshop around best meeting those objectives. For their online workshop, AI focused in particular on what interactive elements they could include to engage participants in such a way that would compensate for the lack of person-to-person interaction.

They considered such basic details as: when and for how long will the workshop take place, what speakers and staff they would need to implement the workshop, what resources they would want to gather (such as videos or documents), how they would approach marketing, and how they would design their syllabus. By determining all of these specifications from the get-go, the AI workshop could then move forward in a much more focused and purposeful manner.

Marketing also played a central role in the success of the AI workshop. To generate attention for the workshop, a unique color scheme and graphics were created. This branding associated the workshop with a particular image, making it more memorable in people's minds, and served as a preview for the feel of the course.



*Examples of branding for the Appreciative Inquiry workshop*

AI also diversified its marketing tactics to reach the maximum amount of people. As they were advertising for an online course, they focused in particular on the different online outlets at their disposal, such as e-mail blasts, press releases, website promotions, and social media announcements through Facebook or Twitter. Targeted mailing lists, listservs of affiliated organizations, and class lists from previous online workshops also helped get the word out.

In conjunction with their marketing plan, AI adapted its registration plan as the workshop evolved. When the Appreciative Inquiry online workshop first began in 2006, the cost was \$800 per student. Today the AI workshop has increased its prices to \$1495 per student, yet registrations for the workshop continue to rise. By effectively employing tactical registration strategies, such as offering graduated targeted discounts, rewarding professional certificate and SHRM credits at the end of the course as incentives, and including a free 1-hour preview webinar with the star presenter, David Cooperrider, AI has successfully sustained interest in their workshop.

After gathering their speakers and participants for the course, AI kept preparations rolling by keeping their lines of communications open. They were in constant contact with speakers so that all the speakers were aware of exactly what was expected of them not only in terms of their course content, but also how they would interact with the class. Workshop participants also received a welcome message after registering, and continued to receive e-mails up until the workshop's launch to set expectations for online posting, schedule, and weekly workload. Recognizing that many individuals might be experiencing e-Learning for the first time, this extra groundwork and preparation was designed to help both speakers and participants feel more prepared and at ease once the workshop began.

During the workshop, AI reached out frequently to its participants in order to build the sense of open collaboration necessary for a productive online learning experience. For example, participants had a 1-hour live orientation with the two site facilitators that explained the concept of AI and gave participants the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the back-and-forth interaction that goes on online. As the workshop unfolded, participants were kept engaged through live 2-hour weekly meetings with Q&A, moderated discussion posts, frequent, friendly announcements about unfolding events, private messaging as needed, and a technical support desk. Having all these facilitating features available and easily accessible allowed students to feel that they were in a structured, welcoming environment. Therefore, rather than worrying about what they need to get done or how to ask for help, students were able to devote themselves more fully to a meaningful community learning experience.

## Summary

### Key Success Factors

- 1. Provide a variety of activities to meet diverse learning styles and motivate participants through the learning cycle.*
- 2. Be flexible and open to changes in the moment.*
- 3. Focus on the participants' learning experience—not the technological tools.*

### Telephone breakout rooms

*One of the ways to get your participants interacting in an online course is through telephone breakout rooms. This technology allows people to call in while listening to a workshop presentation and separate into subgroups where they can collaborate live on learning activities. Many AI participants reported that telephone breakout rooms were beneficial, informative, and a great way to meet others.*

According to recent estimates, the worldwide e-Learning industry is now worth over \$48 billion. As the Internet and collaborative technologies continue to expand, more and more organizations, such as AI, are taking advantage of education online with fantastic results. Using unique learning tools such as live Q&A chat sessions and telephone breakout rooms, AI has provided a new enriching and scholastic environment for participants.

Though it may require more planning to implement an online course, in the end, when it comes to cutting costs, diversifying learning, and reaching out to a broader audience, online courses go above and beyond what an in-person course can accomplish, producing distinctive learning spaces full of exciting potential.



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