

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

### ACTION RESEARCH

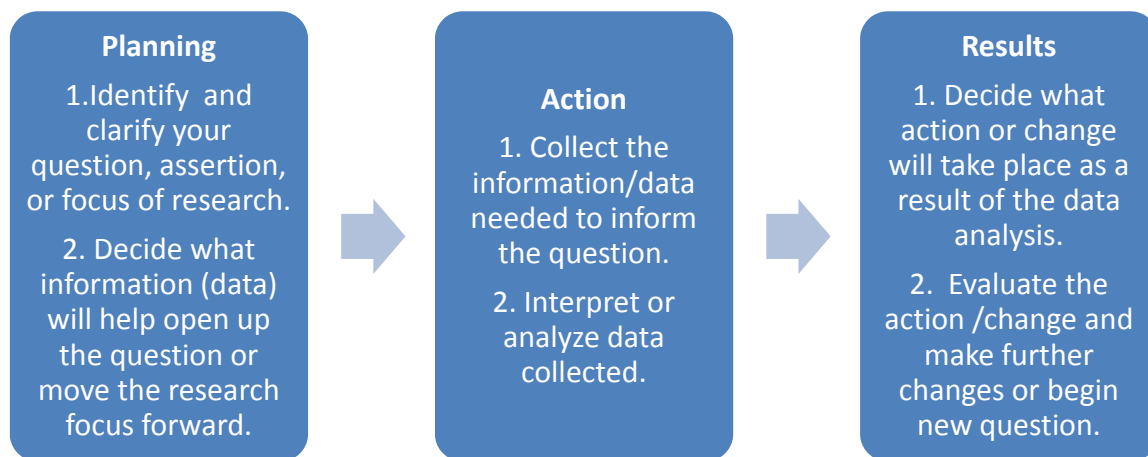
**Action research** is a process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a "community of practice" to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. Action research should be a social learning process involving collaboration at every stage.

#### Overview

Action research is an interactive inquiry process that balances problem solving actions implemented in a collaborative context with data-driven\* collaborative analysis or research to understand underlying causes enabling future predictions about personal and organizational change (Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

\*For teachers, much of the "data" useful to their decision-making about their research question or focus will come from their students, classrooms, and schools. Students' in-class work, projects, journals, test answers, or in-class discussions often provide the data teachers use to inform their questions, assertions, or focus of their research.

1. Faced with a dilemma, the individual or group becomes aware of a need to change.
2. The situation is diagnosed and new models of behavior are explored and tested.
3. New behavior is evaluated, and if useful, adopted.



Many methodologies have evolved that adjust the balance to focus more on the actions taken or more on the research that results from the reflective understanding of the actions. This tension exists between:

1. those who are more driven by the researcher's agenda and those more driven by participants.
2. those who are motivated primarily by instrumental goal attainment and those motivated primarily by the aim of personal, organizational, or societal transformation. and
3. my research on my own action, aimed primarily at personal change; our research on our group (family/team), aimed primarily at improving the group; and "scholarly" research aimed primarily at theoretical generalization and/or large scale change.

**The cycle begins** with planning initiated by the teacher, preferably with input from a learning community working together. The elements of this stage include a preliminary diagnosis, deciding which data should be gathered, and how it will be gathered.

For example: Teacher's question: how might the use of technology deepen my students' understanding of world events?

Teacher discusses/decides what provoked the question, what evidence she or he might use to show increased understandings, and chooses actions that will help her or him examine students' learning/understanding.

**The second stage of action research** is the action phase. This stage includes actions relating to learning processes and to planning and executing behavioral changes in the classroom, or wherever the research is focused. Sometimes at this stage, it becomes obvious that something has been missed in the planning.

For example: Teacher designs research project that will have students use different available technologies, e.g. internet research, social media, print media, TV news/talk shows. Teacher evaluates students' research traditionally and with respect to central question. Teacher discusses evidence of students' work and draws conclusions about media.

**The third stage of action research** is the output, or results, phase. This stage includes actual changes in behavior (if any) resulting from corrective action steps taken following the second stage. Minor adjustments can be made in learning activities. Major adjustments and re-evaluations would return the teacher to the first, or planning, stage for basic changes to the question or focus.

For example: After evaluating the students' research project, the teacher may realize that the technology is only the tool. Depth of understanding comes from how the tools are used and integrated. Teacher redesigns research project.

## OPEN SPACE DISCUSSION: A SUMMARY

**Introduction:** Open Space Technology is a workshop design tool to use when situations include a diverse group of people who must deal with complex, and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways. With Open Space, people tend to be creative, synergistic, and self-motivated. It is a facilitation method in which people can identify specific issues on a given topic, self-select into discussion groups, and work with the issue with people also concerned with that issue.

**Directions:** The following is an outline of directions for facilitating Open Space Conversations.

### **What to expect**

Participants will learn and participate in a group discussion technique called Open Space Technology. This is a tested approach to the enhancement of group effectiveness. It can be used with groups of 5 to 500. It is particularly effective when a number of people must address complex and/or conflicted issues in a short period of time, with high levels of innovation, ownership, and synergy.

### **Begin with the circle**

The circular chair arrangement signifies that all are equal here—both as knowers and learners. Participants are all facing each other equally, with the opportunity to work together to discuss and resolve issues, if they so choose.

### **Passion and responsibility**

Open Space runs on two principles: passion and responsibility. Without passion, nobody is interested. Without responsibility, nothing will get done. Obviously, different people feel passionately about different things and it is also obvious that people will not take responsibility for something they are not passionate about.

In Open Space, people come together around topics they care about. Voluntary self-selection is the absolute principle for participation in the Open Space event.

### **Stating the overarching theme**

The facilitator should tell the group that in a few minutes they will be asked to identify some issues related to a specific topic. It should be an issue for which they have a genuine passion and for which they will take real responsibility for discussing.

They should be thinking of powerful ideas that really grab them to the point that they will take the responsibility to make sure that something gets done about that issue. The facilitator should remind the group that if nothing occurs to someone, that is OK, and if someone has more than one issue or opportunity, that is OK too.

**The facilitator should introduce the following three concepts on a flip chart:**

**1. The four principles for open space**

- whoever comes are the right people
- whatever happens is all that could have
- whenever it starts is the right time
- when it is over, it is over.

**2. The law of two feet**

The Law of Two Feet implies that if, after being in part of a session you no longer are interested in, you have permission to leave. The law puts responsibility for your own actions on your own shoulders.

**3. Bumblebees and butterflies**

Bumblebees and butterflies are for those people who wish to use their two feet and "flit" from meeting to meeting. These people can pollinate and cross-fertilize, lending richness and variety to the discussions.

**The launch**

Take about 15 minutes for the overview of the session and technique of open space.

**Determining the topics**

The facilitator should then tell the group that once they have their issue or opportunity in mind, to come out into the center of the circle, get a piece of paper and marker and write down a short title and sign their name. The description should be shorter than a Tweet. Once done, each person announces his/her topic of choice, e.g., "I would like to address \_\_\_\_\_," or "I'd like to talk with people about \_\_\_\_\_." After each person has announced their topic, they should take the piece of paper and tape it up on the blank wall. When people hear what other topics are up there, they will/should post their idea with it if is alike, or separate from it, if it is different.

Proposing an area for discussion, and taking responsibility for it does not require that the proposer be an expert or that a formal presentation be given. Either or both of those could be true, but it is equally possible that the proposer could be virtually ignorant of the subject and was looking for some people with whom to share the ignorance and develop some knowledge. Taking responsibility means the proposer will designate a time and space and then convene the session. That's all.

**Developing the community bulletin board and agenda**

After people have stood to announce their sessions, and they have posted their paper on the wall, a "community bulletin board" is created with all the possible discussion group topics. At this point there could be a short coffee break while the facilitator(s) organize the board. After the short break, everyone reconvenes and the organizer outlines the topics available for discussion.

**Creating the agenda**

Now that all the possible topics are on the wall, people need to develop an agenda by determining when and where the session/discussion will be held. Ideally, you should have the

groups meeting in different parts of the main meeting room. If not, they should be in breakout rooms with sessions and room numbers noted so that people can freely move between groups if they so choose.

Give people a few minutes to negotiate, combine similar session topics if needed/wanted, and move sessions around so that most people can attend the key sessions of their choice.

By the time the agenda is complete, zone participants should have specific discussion groups determined, as well as the time and place for each group.

All groups should run simultaneously once participants begin.

### **Session recording**

Ask for a volunteer to record critical and important ideas and points raised during the meeting. Have each group self-select a recorder as well as someone to report out to the large group afterwards, if reporting out is appropriate. It may be that just the notes are collected.

### **Possible follow-up**

If you decide to post the reports from each discussion group, you can convene a gallery walk for participants to see what other groups were talking about.

Once the Open Space discussions are over, it is a good idea to plan what to do next, so people don't feel like their talk was for nothing. What is done as a follow up is going to be as varied as the groups that use Open Space and the issues being addressed.

To see a podcast of an open space session, go to [www.openspaceworld.org/news/cat/podcasts/](http://www.openspaceworld.org/news/cat/podcasts/) or enter Open Space process videos on a search engine.

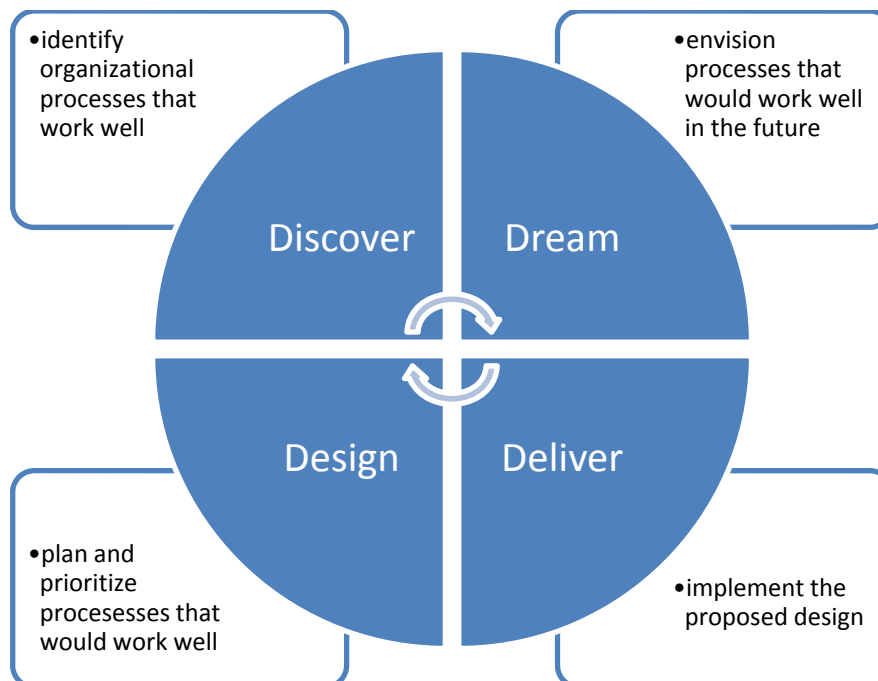
## APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

An organization which tries to appreciate what is best in itself will find/discover more and more of what is good.

**Appreciative Inquiry (AI)** is an organizational development process or philosophy that engages individuals within an organizational system in its renewal, change, and focused performance. AI is based on the assumption that *organizations change in the way they inquire* and the claim that an organization which inquires into problems or difficult situations will keep finding more of the same.

Appreciative Inquiry was adopted from work done by earlier action research theorists and practitioners and further developed by David Cooperrider of Case Western Reserve University and Suresh Srivastva in the 1980s. Cooperrider and Srivastva say that an *organization is a miracle to be embraced* rather than *a problem to be solved*.

Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in a person, a situation, or an organization. In so doing, it enhances a system's capacity for collaboration and change. Appreciative Inquiry utilizes a cycle of four processes focusing on:



1. Discover—what do we do right?
2. Dream—how can we become better, now and in the future?
3. Design—how might we do this?
4. Deliver—what changes will need to take place?

The basic idea is to build organizations around what works, rather than trying to fix what doesn't. It is the opposite of problem solving. Instead of focusing on gaps and inadequacies to remediate skills or practices, AI focuses on how to create more of the exceptional performance that is occurring when a core of strengths is aligned. It opens the door to a universe of possibilities, since the work doesn't stop when a particular problem is solved but rather focuses on "What is the best we can be?" The approach acknowledges the contribution of individuals, in order to increase trust and organizational alignment. The method aims to create meaning by drawing from stories of concrete successes and lends itself to cross-industrial social activities.

Taken and adapted from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative\\_inquiry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Appreciative_inquiry)

## THE WORLD CAFÉ PRESENTS...

### A quick reference guide for putting conversations to work...

Conducting an exciting Café Conversation is not hard. The café format is flexible and adapts to many different circumstances. Café conversations foster collaborative dialogue, active engagement, and constructive possibilities.

The opportunity to move between tables, meet new people, actively contribute ideas, and link the essence of discoveries to ever-widening circles of thought is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Café. As participants carry key ideas or themes to new tables, they exchange perspectives, greatly enriching the possibility for surprising new insights.

1. *Clarify the purpose:* Identify the reasons you are bringing people together. Who needs to be there? What parameters are important to achieve your purpose?
2. *Create a hospitable space:* People need to feel safe and invited to speak openly. Pay attention to the invitation and the physical set-up. Each should help create a welcoming atmosphere.
3. *Explore questions that matter:* The Café might explore one or several questions. The questions can be ones that build on each other, developing a progression of information throughout several rounds of movement and dialogue. In most cases, Café questions are as much about discovering and exploring powerful questions as they are about finding effective solutions.

#### A powerful question

- is simple and clear
- is thought provoking
- focuses inquiry
- surfaces unconscious assumptions
- opens new possibilities.

4. *Encourage everyone's participation:* Try to ensure everyone has an opportunity to speak, share ideas and perspectives, while also allowing anyone who wants to simply listen to do so comfortably.
5. *Connect diverse perspectives:* Through practicing shared listening and paying attention to themes, patterns and insights, we begin to sense a connection to the larger whole. After several rounds of conversation, it is helpful to engage in a whole group conversation. This offers the entire group an opportunity to connect the overall themes or questions that are now present.

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## How to organize a café

- Seat four or five people at a small table.
  - Questions or issues that genuinely matter to your life, work, or community are posed at each table. Other groups at the other tables explore similar or related questions.
  - Set up progressive (usually three) rounds of conversation of approximately 20-30 minutes each.
  - Encourage both table hosts and members to write, doodle, and draw key ideas on the “tablecloth” covering each table.
  - Upon completing a round of conversation, ask one person to remain at the table as the “host” while the others serve as travelers to the next table and question.
  - Ask the table host to welcome the new guests and briefly share the main ideas, themes, and questions of the initial conversation. Encourage guests to link and connect ideas coming from their previous table conversations- listening carefully and building on each other’s contributions.
  - By providing opportunities for people to move in several rounds of conversation, ideas, questions, and themes begin to link and connect. At the end of the second round, all of the tables or conversation clusters in the room will be cross-pollinated with insights from prior conversations.
  - In the third round of conversation, people can return to their home (original) tables to synthesize their discoveries, or they may continue travelling to new tables, leaving the same or a new host at the table. Sometimes a new question that helps deepen the exploration is posed for the third round of conversation.
  - After several rounds of conversation, initiate a period of sharing discoveries and insights in a whole group conversation. It is in these large group conversations that patterns can be identified, collective knowledge grows, and possibilities for action emerge.
- Once you know what you want to achieve and the amount of time you have to work with, you can decide the appropriate number and length of conversation rounds, the most effective use of questions and the most interesting ways to connect and cross pollinate ideas.

### **Café etiquette**

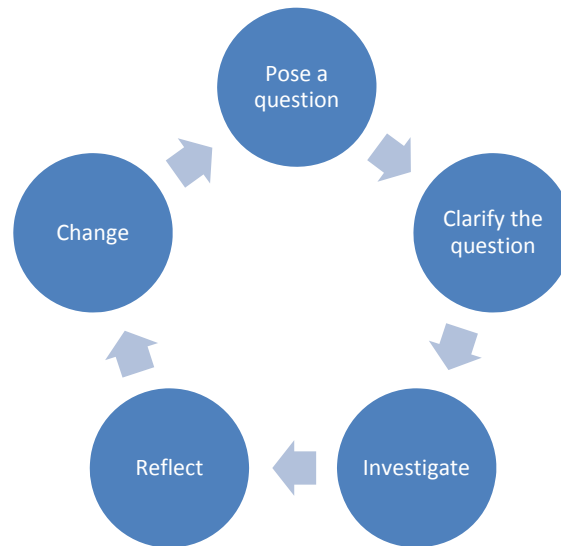
Focus on what matters.  
Contribute your thinking.  
Speak your mind and heart.  
Listen to understand.  
Link and connect ideas.  
Listen together for insights and deeper questions.  
Play, doodle, draw—writing on the tablecloths is encouraged.  
Have fun!

To see a short video on the World Café, go to:

[cultureofempathy.com/Projects/Empathy-Cafe/Planning/About-World-Cafe.htm](http://cultureofempathy.com/Projects/Empathy-Cafe/Planning/About-World-Cafe.htm)

## THE BCTF TEACHER INQUIRY PROGRAM

The BCTF teacher inquiry program is a **process** that involves a group of teachers coming together to pose questions about their practice and then proceed to find out the answers to their questions, usually through the vehicle of action research.



Very often, the initial question that is posed changes, becoming more refined or sometimes even set aside for new, deeper, or emerging questions that arise during the course of the investigation into the original question. Teacher inquiry should be completely self-directed pro-d in that the questions posed should come from the teacher(s) involved in the inquiry themselves, not from an outside source.

Teacher inquiry through the BCTF is supported through grants available to locals or PSAs, facilitators provided to help guide inquiry groups and research provided through the Research department at the Federation. ([bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/ProD/TeacherInquiry.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/ProD/TeacherInquiry.pdf))

Districts can support teacher inquiry by providing matching grants for release time for teacher discussion of their questions, space for meetings, and resources such as journal articles or books to support teachers' investigations.

Locals can support teacher inquiry by bringing teachers from various schools together to investigate questions on a common theme or teachers who are interested in forming an inquiry group within the local. Local PD committees can support inquiry by making provision for inquiry groups to meet on district PD days and access local union office facilities.

(The following are excerpts from a report to the BCTF Executive Committee from the Teacher Inquiry work group, April 2008, [bctf.ca](http://bctf.ca) professional development publications: *Teacher Inquiry in the BCTF: A focus for supporting teachers' professional development*)

## **Existing BCTF programs which support Teacher Inquiry**

Currently, Teacher Inquiry is supported through the Program for Quality Teaching (PQT) Program, and in projects developed by the Research Department (at the BCTF).

## **The Program for Quality Teaching (PQT)**

### **Background**

PQT is based on the principles of collegiality, mutuality, and supportive professional relationships. Participants become equal partners in pursuit of strengthening their practice and advancing their profession.

### **PQT/Inquiry program benefits**

- Gain a greater theoretical understanding of teaching
- Strengthen ability to self-evaluate teaching
- Increase confidence and ability to incorporate new strategies in teaching
- Increase skill in providing useful feedback to another teacher
- Increase respect for colleagues
- Create a more open sharing of instructional ideas
- Improve problem-solving with colleagues, and
- Improve relationships with teachers and administrators.

One key goal is to offer support for inquiry groups that reflect a preferred form of learning community, run by and for teachers.

One example of such a learning community comes from School District 46, Sunshine Coast: "Our local Learning Community Team consists of school-based and district inquiry groups of teachers working together to improve student learning and to increase our use of classroom-based assessment and performance standards to inform instruction.

Four formal meetings are scheduled throughout the year to provide an opportunity for the teams to exchange ideas and resources and to learn from each other's experience. The Inquiry Project Celebration forum has been successfully implemented within our district and has provided an opportunity for the networking, energy, and communication amongst our district teachers, principals, board members, and parents."

To view a PowerPoint about the BCTF Teacher Inquiry program, go to [bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/ProD/TeacherInquiry.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/ProD/TeacherInquiry.pdf)