

Valencia Students Into Random Acts of Listening

I was happy to be invited, for a second time, as sometime-professor at the University of Valencia to work with students in the Erasmus program “European Master in Work, Organizational and Personnel Psychology (WOP-P) 2024” for the course Intervention in Organizations, Organizational Change and Development (see photo). My three-day lecture is about contemporary methods of organizational change and development: Appreciative Inquiry interventions.



This [LinkedIn post](#) by Bishal Sala gives an impression of how it went. AI, of course, is the perfect practice for a process of “learning by doing”. We designed our own AI-summit on the self-chosen – and essential – topic of Work-Life-Balance.

Fast forward to the individual assignment I created, inspired by Nick Heap and Random Acts of Listening initiative, which turned out to be a great success, highly rewarding for both teacher and students.



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Appreciative Inquiry Reflection with a Stranger

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Dear Professor,

Before everything, I would like to thank you for this beautiful and outside-the-box individual assignment. I was initially skeptical about it, especially given my past less-than-positive experiences in Spain with strangers. Last year, I struggled to communicate in Spanish, which often led to a not-so-positive attitude toward me, despite my efforts to be polite. However, Arthur was an amazing person, and I am so happy I had the opportunity to talk with him. He is Irish, so he spoke English fluently, which maybe didn't help me in communicating with a local person, but that facilitated our conversation.

Planning the assignment

Today, October 20th, 2024, I decided to visit a friend who runs a lab for creating Halloween mugs from clay near Rusafa, Valencia, which meant that I arrived late for class, which was full, and had to wait for approximately 40 minutes outside. While waiting, I found a comfortable table and opened my laptop to check on this assignment. I created a plan for my questions centered around appreciation in life, eager to discover what people value. My approach was based on Appreciative Inquiry and the five-step model of Define, Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver.

Initially, my plan was to find a student the next day at the university to conduct the interview with, as I felt psychologically unprepared to talk to a total stranger outside the university space due to language barriers.

During the wait a dog approached me, followed by a middle-aged gentleman. After a brief chat with my friend, who was facilitating the activities, he told me in English that he thought he needed to wait as well. He commented to me, “At least you have your laptop” and laughed. We engaged in a small conversation, discovering our shared appreciation for art and creation, despite our hesitance to pursue it ourselves. I also shared that I had prepared some general questions for an interview. In that moment, I felt brave and social, and I stepped out of my comfort zone when I suggested we conduct the interview together.

After considering my proposal, he initially seemed a bit stressed about taking a photo but ultimately agreed. He confided that his wife had asked for a divorce the previous day, which made him anxious. I clarified that if he wasn't feeling up to it, we could wait for the class and forget about the interview idea, but he insisted on proceeding. He asked to start with a selfie to help him not dwell on the situation, and I happily agreed.

A peaceful state of mind

We began with the general question: “What does appreciation mean to you?” He replied, “Appreciation is to be thankful and to appreciate the things around you.” I then asked what he appreciated the most, and he said that it was a peaceful state of mind, noting that this requires financial stability, love from family and friends, and affection from a partner. Wanting to dive deeper and facilitate the conversation, I prompted him to consider smaller actions or specific events that he appreciates.

He mentioned his dog, Iris, (who I had already met) and his open-minded siblings, who were supporting him during this difficult time. Sensing he was becoming emotional about the divorce, I shifted the topic and asked what he appreciated in his job. He initially replied that he was jobless, but then clarified that he is self-employed, travels around the world, and works from anywhere. He noted, “I appreciate that I can travel around the world”, but also remarked that while he enjoys travelling, he feels that money mostly brings material things rather than meaningful experiences.

What has made you smile?

I then applied the model steps, starting with a first question (with intentions to define): “What has made you smile today?” After a moment's thought, I followed up with “What makes you happy lately?” He mentioned his dog and reflected on how he had been struggling to smile since his wife had said she wanted to divorce him. I pointed out that he had smiled in the second photo we took during (he asked me to delete the first one, so I did) and during some parts of our conversation, which he said he hadn't realised.

Next, I asked him to envision his ideal future in order to discover the desired future and dream the ideal one. He described wanting to find companionship, whether as a friend or partner, without necessarily seeking marriage. I inquired about how he thought this could happen. He expressed scepticism, stating that he needed to be more open to getting to know people and to move on from what had ended. He mentioned he was okay with not having children, since he has his dog, but wanted someone to spend time with.

He continued, sharing that we as humans appreciate different things at different stages of life, and expressed a desire to start reflecting on what he values. We then conversed about our trips around the world, sharing photos of our travels. At the end of our discussion, I captured a photo of him holding his dog before heading to class.

Seeing things differently, focussing on the positive

Through our conversation, I gained a deeper understanding of what people appreciate and how relevant life is. Arthur said that I was young and may not fully appreciate my health now, but that appreciation will come with time. During the class and the interview, I realised that appreciation helps us see things differently and allows us to focus on the positive aspects of life. This perspective can be applied everywhere, igniting our passion for what we do and giving us a purpose to reflect on positive experiences rather than dwell solely on what didn't go well.

I want to describe this as a life-learning experience that can also be applied in organisations, fostering positive changes that align with my way of thinking. In this class, I felt heard and validated in my ideas, which made me feel less delusional about positivity. I believe we need to dream of the ideal. We are allowed to dream and desire, and we can imagine a perfect future. If we can envision it, we can create it or, at the very least, become more aware of the steps we need to take and the efforts required to make it a reality!

Thank you once again for this assignment, which allowed me to step outside my comfort zone. I appreciated the beautiful conversation that I had with Arthur, and I think we made each other smile and I really appreciate myself when I make people smile and I so appreciate people when they smile as well!