NATIONAL SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL SYNTHESIS CENTER



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Lesson – Qualitative Methods for Actionable Sustainability: Appreciative Inquiries and Learning Journeys

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Overview:

This is the second lesson in an introductory two-part series on qualitative methods used for actionable sustainability. The first lesson can be found here: Narrative and Identity in Climate Beliefs. It is recommended to complete these lessons in order, as they build upon concepts.

Actionable science seeks to identify solutions to problems, but it can also seek to find solutions for enacting change. Two approaches for identifying solutions for enacting change are the qualitative methods of appreciative inquiry and learning journeys. These methods involve learning from conversations about individuals' observations, sustainability aspirations, and considerations of what is vs. what is possible. Using these methods, participants listen to others' thoughts and views without judgment and search together for sustainability solutions that challenge old assumptions. These interactions can lead to positive new ways of thinking that can ultimately inspire change. In this lesson, participants use appreciative inquiry and a learning journey to document positive actions on their campus and in their community. This exercise will culminate in sharing a "good seed"—an idea or plan to move forward sustainability initiatives.

Assumed Prior Knowledge:

Appropriate for undergraduates and well beyond. It will help for the instructor to have knowledge of the previous lesson: "Qualitative Methods for Actionable Sustainability: Narrative and Identity in Climate Beliefs." Suitable for new learners interested in environmental sustainability—high school and college.

Learning Objectives:

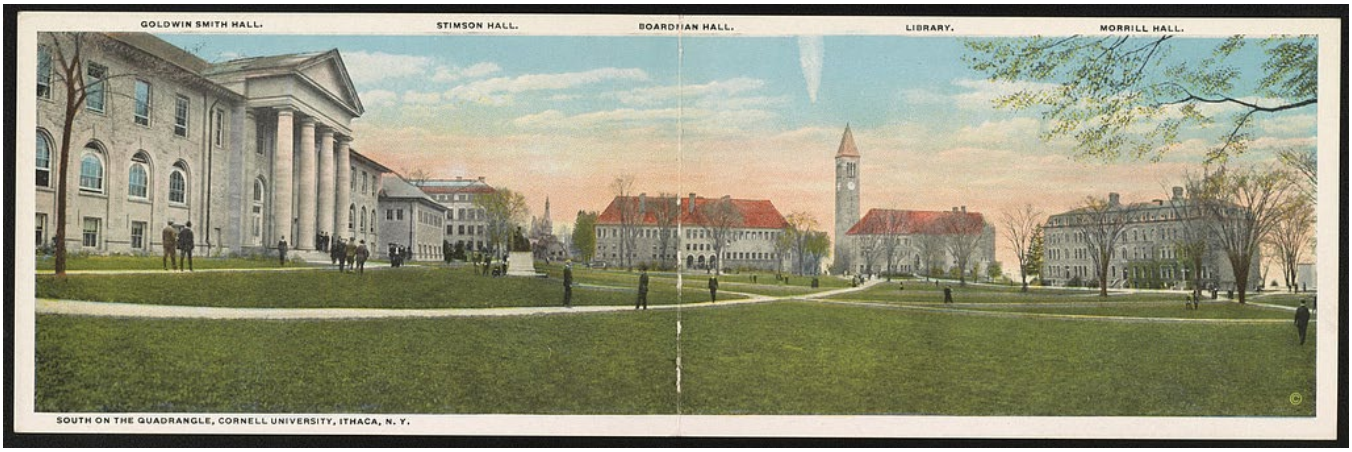
- Understand and apply the qualitative methods of appreciative inquiry and a learning journey to an interesting space on your campus.
- Engage in field-based learning by visiting a campus sustainability initiative, discussing observations and how the initiative might contribute to a more positive future through story or plans.
- Based on field work, create a presentation or written description that considers the distinct kinds of information that come from qualitative and quantitative data.
- Undertake an optional exercise to engage in actionable science by linking a campus initiative with a global web resource.

Key Terms and Concepts:

good seeds; appreciative inquiry; learning journeys; actionable science

The "Hook" (suggestions for quickly engaging students):

Improving the Campus Quadrangle: Behold, the classic campus quad. Participants should view this century-old image and consider the layout, infrastructure, and people represented. In a 5-min. discussion, ask them: What can be appreciated about the social and environmental features of this space? Is anything outdated, unequal, or unsustainable? Have participants combine their appreciation for its assets with a critique of its limitations in a quickly written reflection. If they were a facilities manager, how would they adapt the space for the 21st century?



South on the Quadrangle, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Postcard c. 1900.
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Teaching Assignments:

Appreciative Inquiries and Learning Journeys (Two, 75-min. classes, plus optional extension) The first session involves time in class followed by students moving in groups to campus locations where they participate in an interactive activity. The second session involves students reflecting on their experiences in the previous session by writing a narrative or creating a presentation on how to enhance sustainability. A third, optional session involves students writing proposals for a new seed from their campus to submit to the Seeds of the Good Anthropocene site.

- **Class Session 1:** Steps 1–5
- **Class Session 2:** Steps 6–9
- **Class Session 3 (Optional Extension):** Steps 10–14

1. **Class 1: Understanding and Applying the Methods on Campus Introducing Good Seeds**

   Introducing Good Seeds: Begin the class by introducing the concepts of good seeds, as well as the methods of appreciative inquiry and learning journeys. The following PowerPoint slides may facilitate this; the instructor should elicit comments throughout so that the slides become tools for discussion and reflection. Why are GDP, CO_2 emissions and raw-material use related statistically?

   Appreciative_Inquiry_Learning_Journey_Lesson_Slides_Accessible.pptx

2. **Research:** Give participants 10 min. individually to research sustainability initiatives on campus—both the social and environmental aspects—and especially campus-community collaborations. These initiatives may include gardens for pollinators and food, preserved or rehabilitated forests, zero-carbon commitments, sustainable transportation, applied community projects, LEED-certified structures, waste reductions, composting programs, and efforts to support the community's physical and mental health with access to green space and reflective programs. The instructor might do a search in advance to have an idea of the options before class to use time most efficiently; the instructor might also pre-arrange an ideal field trip.

3. **Brainstorming Session:** Have the group (or subgroups) do a brainstorming session, discussing what they found and listing at least three good seed initiatives. They should gather as many details as possible, especially location and public access information. Each group should choose a target initiative based on the concept of a good seed—the goal being that the initiative is ahead of mainstream culture. Depending on the leadership and finances on your campus, you may have many or few options that meet this standard.

4. **Seed Visit:** The group (or subgroups) should choose one good seed to visit today. Have them walk to this location and make sure participants have their senses attuned and are able to take notes. For example, they might visit a newly restored public square with shade trees, flowers, and green space for study and communing. Or they might visit a diner that has recently committed to local food sourcing, zero waste, or an alternative economic arrangement with a food-for-work co-op design. They should take notes, perhaps draw sketches, and consider what they smell or hear.

5. **Combine Qualitative Data**: Each group (or subgroup) should combine their qualitative field note observations into one column and in a column next to that, any quantitative information they can

find on their site (e.g., funding, measurable impacts).

6. **Class 2: Extending the Learning Journey to Envision How to Expand Sustainability**

   Data Synthesis: Have the group (subgroups) discuss their notes from the learning journey and write a description (story or other form) or develop a slide presentation on how they could envision improvement in the initiative site they visited (i.e., sketch out a 'good seed' idea). Their reflection should include how this site might be integral to building and fostering a better future i.e., a Good Anthropocene.

7. **Presentations:** If there are subgroups, have them share their description, story, or presentation.

8. **Data Synthesis Reflection:** Give each participant 5 min. to write notes on how they used the qualitative and quantitative information to develop their good seed idea (i.e., the story or presentation from the prior bullet.) Then, discuss as a group asking which data type they viewed as more valuable. Which is more likely to lead to change?

9. **Sharing Results:** Consider compiling the presentations and sharing them with facilities managers and administrators as positive examples of students engaging with sustainability initiatives on their campus.

10. **Class 3 (Optional Extension): Plant the Seed**

    Research Proposal Development: In this optional session, organize groups based on their choice of appreciated space. Have them go to the Seeds of Good Anthropocenes (SGA) site and read up on how to develop a proposal for a new seed from your campus. In class, you may want to have them review and discuss several posted seeds on the website.

11. **Notes on Good Seeds:** Participants will note that existing seeds are often extensive community-based projects that involve multiple stakeholders and achieve several desired outcomes. Take the well-known seed the High Line Park in New York City as an example. Though the number of people involved is enormous, the desired outcomes are straightforward: support urban biodiversity and provide green space for New York City residents and tourists. The High Line also achieves desirable economic and artistic goals.

12. **Find Campus-Appropriate Seeds:** Note that very few of the currently posted seeds grow on college campuses. Most are international, and many are seeded in vulnerable, environmental justice communities. Decide which campus-community seed among the ones you explored is most suited to pitching to SGA. List ways that a college campus community is a unique nexus of knowledge, innovation, learning, and local enrichment, and make that description part of the pitch for your seed.

13. **Proposal Development:** Each team should collaboratively complete the proposal for their seed offline. If there are multiple seeds proposed, exchange them in a workshop to review and edit between groups. Each proposal should have a vision for how the seed can grow and benefit culture in the future. After editing proposals, conduct a final review and post them to the SGA proposal

portal.

14. **Future Sessions:** Update the class about the progress of their seeds with SGA and invite participants to continue their inquiries and qualitative appreciation of their seed by volunteering, monitoring, or boosting the online presence of this initiative. Now show the full figure (slide 3) that also includes the green map and ask why income level shows strong overlap with temperature?

Background Information for the Instructor:

1. **Actionable Research Lesson**

    - This lesson is useful as background because it describes what is a more traditional view of actionable research. It does not describe research in which researchers actively participate in moving the work into implementation i.e., enact research for change.

    - Boyd, James. (2022, February 28). *Lesson – Actionable Research*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/lesson-actionable-research

2. **Assessing Tourism Potential and Ecotourism Attractions of Annapurna Base Camp Nepal through an Appreciative Inquiry Approach**

    - This is a useful article because it illustrates how an appreciative inquiry approach can be used to develop a strategic plan that incorporates many relevant perspectives. In this case, input from diverse groups of people and organizations was meant to ensure a successful ecotourism plan for the Annapurna region of Nepal.

    - Bhattarai, P., Rawal, K., & Anup, K.C. (2024). Assessing Tourism Potential and Ecotourism Attractions of Annapurna Base Camp Nepal through an Appreciative Inquiry Approach. *Journal of Tourism, Sustainability, and Well-Being. Vol 12*(3): 241-256. https://journals.cinturs.pt/jtsw/article/view/481

References:

- Seeds of Good Anthropocenes. (n.d.). *Contribute a Seed* [Google Form]. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdbFVMmIG8iyUV8IxZn3ACbacyDyr2g83XwCU2-j34CWuJnjw/viewform
- Seeds of Good Anthropocenes. (n.d.). *Homepage*. https://goodanthropocenes.net/
- The High Line. (n.d.). *Homepage*. https://www.thehighline.org/
- World Economic Forum. (2017, February 14). *Identifying successful socio ecological initiatives | Elena Bennett* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/3iVaZ7qkku4?si=mBlISzqd-Tlm1ScF

Related SESYNC Content:

- Palmer, M.A. (2022, August 18). *Explainer – Qualitative Synthesis Methods: Critical Interpretive Reviews, Narrative Reviews, Expert Opinions*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/explainer-qualitative-synthesis-methods-critical-interpretive-reviews-narrative-reviews
- Palmer, M.A., & Hondula, K. (2022, August 26). *Explainer – Quantitative Synthesis Methods for Sustainability: Data Integration*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/explainer-

quantitative-synthesis-methods-sustainability-data-integration

- Palmer, M.A. (2022, August 15). *Explainer – Quantitative Synthesis Methods: Literature Reviews (Systematic and Meta-Analyses), Expert Elicitation*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/explainer-quantitative-synthesis-methods-literature-reviews-systematic-and-meta-analyses
- Palmer, M.A., & Scott, H. (2022, September 2). *Lesson – Marine Spatial Planning for Sustainability: An Example of a Semi-Qualitative Synthesis Approach*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/marine-spatial-planning-sustainability-example-semi-qualitative-synthesis-approach
- Scott, H. (2023, April 7). *Explainer – Critical Discourse Analysis: Qualitative Content Approach*. https://www.sesync.org/resources/explainer-critical-discourse-analysis-qualitative-content-approach
- Scott, H. (2022, July 27). *Lesson – Qualitative Methods for Actionable Sustainability: Narrative and Identity in Climate Beliefs*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/introduction-qualitative-methods-sustainability-narrative-and-identity-climate-beliefs
- SESYNC. (2018, May 14). *Qualitative Comparative Analysis* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/I4h7Vw6aNVk?si=lcNpLIjB00P-WY36
- SESYNC. (2018, May 14). *Qualitative Data for Sustainability Problems: An Example Integrating Textual Data* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/aj81nfyj8pA?si=2LX6p3rfNLE1iVJK

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