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## The Appreciative Journey: A Guide to Developing International Cultural Exchanges

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### Abstract (Summary)

In the world of international cultural exchange, where intentions are often difficult to discern and the execution of exchanges is an imperfect art, this contribution is no small feat.

### Full Text (1028 words)

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The Appreciative Journey: A Guide to Developing International Cultural Exchanges By Michael E. Sikes, Mary Campbell Zopf, Jami Goldstein, and Wayne Lawson. Columbus: Ohio Arts Council, 2006

In this era of rapid globalization, increased contact among the peoples and cultures around the planet appears to be an unstoppable trend. Although there has been limited policy theorizing about how the arts fit into this phenomenon, the Ohio Arts Council has led the way by developing *The Appreciative Journey*, a practical guide to the design and operation of cultural exchange as a segment of international cultural activity.

The Guide makes three meaningful contributions to the field. The first is that it is designed to be used by individuals who have vastly different levels of experience. Although the authors should be applauded for expanding the audience for the work, the breadth of the Guide's attempted reach can leave the more experienced internationalist wanting something more complex. Nevertheless, today, the broad-based growing awareness of global issues and the lack of the public's confidence in political leaders to manage global relations make everyone a potential global activist. These factors combined with relatively inexpensive air travel result in a much broader range of people desiring to engage in international work.

The Guide's second contribution is that it proposes appreciative inquiry as a framework for conceptualizing all aspects of an exchange. The method of appreciative inquiry is manifested in the Guide in several ways. In the section on discovery, the reader is asked to spend some time reflecting on the intention the organizers bring to the task of planning a cultural exchange. This clarification of intention through discovery is a key aspect of the appreciative-inquiry approach and offers insightful advice. The reader is also asked to dream—a part of the appreciative-inquiry frame—and not just dream but dream together, a highly effective way to build common vision. Finally, the Guide focuses on ways to deliver a cultural exchange, and here it provides a higher-level treatment of that delivery as far more than just completing the cultural exchange. This segment suggests tasks such as amending existing plans to maximize outcome in the face of changing environments, the value of active monitoring during the rollout of the program, and the benefits of effective evaluation.

The Guide's third major contribution is a step-by-step guide for the planning and execution of an exchange. In the world of international cultural exchange, where intentions are often difficult to discern and the execution of exchanges is an imperfect art, this contribution is no small feat.

The Guide succeeds mightily as a workbook for those planning and managing a cultural exchange. The authors take readers through virtually every stage of the process, from dreaming about the activity to post-event evaluation. It also provides sample documents, loan agreements, sample invoices, and much more. In the area of details, the work excels, and its clear and direct approach to dispensing information makes the Guide valuable even to the avocational internationalist who wishes to structure an exchange.

The Guide defines appreciative inquiry as "the basic navigation tool for taking a journey. Founded on the notion that the most successful journeys are envisioned as quests for some desirable future, appreciative inquiry reveals people's aspirations and assets that compel them to make journeys" (7). The positioning of this approach in the text is not as fully disclosing as it might be. Readers would benefit from knowing that appreciative inquiry is a relatively new organizational development process that focuses on building organizations and connections on elements that work, rather than focusing on repairing dysfunction. The authors also could reveal that the major chapter headings come directly from the four-stage process of appreciative inquiry.

Although the reader is not informed of how truly anchored in the appreciative-inquiry process the Guide is, the placing of a thoughtful framework on the act of imagining and executing a cultural exchange is commendable. The appreciative-inquiry approach is serviceable as a framework for this activity, and in many respects, highly desirable and empowering. The Guide would be enriched, however, through the mention of other overarching frameworks that could be considered to frame cultural exchange. Such frameworks might be feminist theory, writings in critical cultural studies, and even writings in the area of statecraft. Nevertheless, the appreciative-inquiry approach is a positive and, as early results indicate, highly productive approach to the work of designing a cultural exchange.

The less beneficial aspect of this work is its overproduction. Although individual pages are graphically competent, as a whole, the work is too much graphic design chasing too little text, resulting in something rather busy and distracting. The work has been packaged as information that is easy to access and seems to be using multiple graphic elements to reinforce accessibility and otherwise interest the reader in the work. I would suggest that most of the individuals who seek this information would welcome a less busy format—they just want the information.

An intriguing commentary that occurs in the work is one that reflects on how Mark Moore's work on public value relates to the design of international exchanges. Moore's work does relate; however, references to it seem to be tacked on to the overall discussion rather than thoughtfully integrated into it. Such an integration would be particularly useful to public-sector entities engaged in international work. If such entities were able to address the issue of public value while working in the appreciative-inquiry frame to design their work, the results could be very powerful and long lasting.

The Guide is a wonderful addition to thinking and action in the area of international exchange. Although a more robust consideration of alternative conceptual frames for this activity would be welcome and the debt to appreciative inquiry should be made more explicit, what is presented here is a useful step forward. Also, the fact that the information in this work is rooted in the significant international experience of the Ohio Arts Council makes it both highly tangible and highly credible. The work should seed many new international exchanges and, more important, it will undoubtedly make those exchanges a richer experience with more meaningful and long-lasting outcomes.

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