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Arpi Arus

Arpi Arus is an educator and author working in the field of Appreciative Inquiry and positive communication. She has facilitated online learning spaces for youth affected by conflict and displacement. Arpi Arus is the author of *The Power of Appreciative Communication* and continues to develop educational resources that bring appreciative practices into classrooms and communities.

Contact: hello@arpiarus.com

Appreciative Inquiry as Lived Experience – When It Gets Personal

Appreciative Inquiry at a Time of Distress

This article describes how online classes in Armenian for middle and high school students from Artsakh, also known as Nagorno Karabakh, evolved into a support network for the students living in Artsakh during the time of political upheaval in 2022. Using Appreciative Inquiry principles, they navigated the many challenges of living in a war zone together support each other, solve problems, and find ways to stay connected and support each other and their communities.

What follows is not a light read, but it is a luminous one. Arpi Arus, a facilitator and educator in the Armenian diaspora, brought Appreciative Inquiry to a group of children in Artsakh and remained connected with them through blockade, displacement, and loss. This is her account of what the practice held, and what the children themselves chose to offer back. It is not an easy story, and the hope it holds is not despite the darkness but born directly from it. As an editorial team, we were both inspired and humbled by this article. It pushed us to think more honestly about what Appreciative Inquiry is truly capable of holding, and what it asks of those who practice it.

How it started

It began like sneaking vegetables into your child's food. A teacher in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh was conducting online Armenian classes to diasporan Armenians. I was one of the Vermont parents whose child was enrolled. We discussed connecting American students with children from her village for daily one-on-one dialogues. The local children who volunteered loved languages and creative writing, so we initiated periodic brainstorming and coordination sessions. I began using Appreciative Inquiry to facilitate these meetings.

We concluded that the greatest asset the people of Artsakh possess is their resilience – their ability to survive, their deep knowledge of the Armenian language, and their profound love for their culture. I started teaching them Appreciative Inquiry as part of their Armenian language class.



The greatest asset the people of Artsakh possess is their resilience

Image created by Milena Avetisyan, used by permission of Arpi Arus

The spirit remained the same: kindness, turn-taking, and respect.

The group met online on Saturdays. The “sneaking vegetables” came when I started assigning them Kelm’s daily exercises: list three things you appreciate today and one joyful activity you’ll do tomorrow. The hardest part was finding different things every day. I asked them to email their lists to me daily. It was a short, enjoyable Armenian language and creative writing assignment.

We started in September 2022, before the economic blockade of Artsakh. Our initial objective was to teach the skill of reframing – helping kids see situations through a positive lens.

Facilitation and classroom dynamics

From the beginning, our virtual classroom included students aged from eleven to seventeen. It was remarkable to watch such a wide age group work together so respectfully and naturally. In every group, the youngest students were often the most enthusiastic, and the older ones quickly recognized their sincerity and gave them space to lead.

When we began, the children were shy about facilitating. Nobody wanted to take on the responsibility of guiding the session, especially knowing that they would need to make sure everyone had a chance to speak. We had two simple rules to support them:

1. When someone wanted to speak, they would ask the co-facilitator for permission.
2. When the co-facilitator gave an instruction, the group would follow it.

The rules changed slightly over time as the children became more comfortable and confident, but the spirit remained the same: kindness, turn-taking, and respect.

The co-facilitator’s role was meaningful. They opened the session, checked that everyone had a chance to express their opinion or answer the question, and gently encouraged those who were quieter or hesitant. They also protected the right to pass – those who did not feel ready to speak were always given permission to skip their turn.

One of the most memorable moments was when our youngest facilitator, an eleven-year-old girl, took the lead in teaching all of us how to use Zoom’s emoticons. She showed the older teens – and the adults – how to express support through hearts, applause, and smiley faces. On the days she facilitated, the screen would fill with brightly colored emoticons. This small act made her

feel empowered, and it opened a door for others. Once they saw that leadership did not require age, size, or authority – only care and courage – they began volunteering more often.

Our facilitation structure grew naturally. At first, the children led only the daily appreciation exercise. Later, they invited classmates to share their homework, which usually consisted of a short essay on the previous week's topic. Many loved writing these essays, but those who preferred to speak spontaneously were equally welcome. There was never pressure – only invitation.

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Towards the end of the year, facilitation became so popular that we created a small waitlist to ensure everyone had their turn. Watching the children claim these roles and grow into them made it clear that they were not just participants in a class. They were learning how to listen, how to support each other, and how to guide a conversation with empathy. I could already see the future teachers and facilitators within them.

Under siege

On December 12, 2022, Artsakh was cut off from the rest of the world. The children of Artsakh became the hostages of dirty politics that took the lives of parents and relatives of my students. We were about to end the class and celebrate the holiday season when the blockade of Lachin Corridor started. The students asked me to continue our weekly classes through the Christmas vacation.

Staying positive was hard. The ceasefire was broken several times. After the shelling of a civilian vehicle, I could see that the kids were scared. Not knowing how to reframe, I asked: "Do you have a designated shelter, a place where you can wait comfortably during the next shelling?" The kids started texting in a panic that none of their villages had bomb shelters. Then someone typed that their school had a pretty deep and large basement, and that was the only place for the villagers to hide during the shelling. Someone else from another village responded that their school basement was similar.

The following week during our appreciation exercise, some reported that they'd contacted their village administration, got in touch with their school supply person, went house-to-house to collect mattresses and blankets, put pots with drinking water in the basement, brought empty buckets to use as toilets, and even brought their favorite Harry Potter books to start a bomb-shelter library.

In times of distress, Appreciative Inquiry is the ability to see the problem, but to also have the skill of recovering from the initial shock, to reframe the situation,

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to think intensively towards finding a way through. Teaching kids to stay positive during the Christmas vacation when all the stores are empty and there is little food was not easy. We forgot our initial project. Our goals had changed; we simply met each week to discuss the topics that interested children living in the economic blockade. To facilitate the conversation, we discussed the topics of sincerity, “elevator pitches”, compassion fatigue, culpability, Brené Brown’s view on vulnerability, Fran Peavey’s model of strategic questioning, and touched on topics from Glencoe Speech. We also used some of Richard Bolstad’s suggested workshops from “Transforming Communications”. Our discussions were based around the children’s experiences, their ideas, and their suggestions.

Shifting goals

When the students asked us to discuss the Russian–Ukrainian war, we knew that it was not a simple discussion. Although there was a way to ask the students what they thought first, and add the teachers’ opinions at the end, we realized that we were from two different worlds. In one, it was safe to sleep at night, there was plenty of food and entertainment, and there was reliable information from multiple sources about the atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine. Information like signs saying “Children” or “Hospital” did not keep Ukrainian children or hospital patients safe: those sites were cruelly targeted.

On the other hand, we had the children of Artsakh asking us questions. They were children living in a volatile world on a small piece of land cut off from the rest of the world, in villages with empty stores, scarce food and medication. In one essay, one of the girls wrote: “I am from Artsakh, the world’s most sleepless place.” The only hope that these kids had was that the Russian peacekeepers in Artsakh were the reliable guarantors of their safety.

We decided to introduce a separate topic of culpability before the discussion of the Russian–Ukrainian war. This lesson started by separating actions not forbidden by law from those that are. Separating constitutional from unconstitutional. Understanding the difference between simple and aggravated crimes, those that are unintentional versus crimes involving moral turpitude. Using Tumanyan’s fables, we explored the difference between legal and illegal acts and moral and immoral behavior. Culpability became an inseparable part of our Appreciative Inquiry lessons.

Connection across borders

Just before the summer vacation, the children asked about Armenian schools in the USA. The Armenian community in Vermont is very small; the closest

school was in Massachusetts. We organized an online question–answer session between the students of Ereboundi Armenian School in Massachusetts and our students from Artsakh. The children took turns asking questions of each other. Some of the children became pen–pals. They would write letters and post them in a chat group. Then someone from the other end would pick up the letter, write back, and continue one–on–one communication.

An excerpt from one of these letters reads:

We have only one dream and goal: we want a joyful and worry-free life in our Artsakh.
Student living in Artsakh

*Hello,
I love meeting new people. Thank you for paying attention to the children of Artsakh. We have only one dream and goal: we want a joyful and worry-free life in our Artsakh. The war is a very bad thing. It took away from me the dearest person I had – my father. I wish that everything stopped there and no war continued anymore...*

The forced displacement

At the end of May 2023, we decided to pause for summer vacations: the teenagers were taking summer jobs and in on–the–job training. Towards the end of August, we started discussing whether they wanted to return to our classes in September. The forceful displacement of Artsakh’s population started in the middle of that discussion. There were several days of complete lack of communication. The diasporan community – all those who had ever taken Armenian classes with the local teacher, or joined our online meetings for an event or as a guest speaker –everyone was frantically discussing how we could help.

Eventually, the local teacher managed to contact us. We asked her to send us the names and the dates of birth of children and their families. We decided to send all the names to the Red Cross, the UN, American congressional committees, and all other possible American legislators and public officials to make sure that some official inquiries with those names were circulated within diplomatic channels of Armenia and Azerbaijan. We organized an official inquiry through the Red Cross to find missing persons.

We sent a separate message to each child, urging them to show it to any Russian or Azeri military as a last resort. The message stated that the Red Cross was looking for them and that American legislators were requesting the information be sent to a congressional inquiry to clarify their whereabouts. We weren’t receiving responses from the children; we assumed that every message we sent to their phones was being read by Azeri and Russian military.

I am amazed at how much Appreciative Inquiry helped us to get through this.

Looking back, I am amazed at how much Appreciative Inquiry helped us to get through this. Our daily exercises in the appreciation of little things made us think faster and find solutions that could help us to get to a better place. When the mass exodus from Artsakh started, the kids, one by one, managed to find charging points for their phones and write to us about their current situations. None of them complained! All of them were telling us that we did not need to worry too much, things were just slow, there was no gasoline, and traffic was clogged; however, they were all slowly but steadily moving in the right direction. It was amazing to see how many kids sent me separate messages where every word was crafted using a positive, strengths-based approach.

Healing in Armenia



A fairytale tree

Image created by Milena Avetisyan, used by permission of Arpi Arus

No matter how positive those messages were, the process was traumatic. Some kids lost fathers and brothers to the war. Some lost family members in the explosion of the gas station in Stepanakert on the last days of their exodus. All of them lost their homes, their toys, their motherland, and their childhoods. There was no way to start the classes as usual; the need was for intensive grief therapy.

The headmaster from Erebuny School, Armine Manukyan, helped us to identify therapists in California who volunteered to participate in our classes. We also decided to expand and urged the pilot group students to bring their friends and relatives to the classroom. We added ten more kids to the group. The two psychologists from California helped us tremendously during that time. Dr Lucia Babayants later became our long-term co-facilitator and helped the kids to re-bounce.

She was also compassionate about replacing the children's bad memories with better ones. She financed a New Year event that helped the children, some of whom had never met each other, to get together in person in Yerevan for a celebration.

It was important for the newcomers to go through the same Appreciative Inquiry training. I started writing separate lessons in Armenian for them and urging the children from the pilot group to practice teaching some of the material that they were familiar with from the previous year. Three or four volunteered and tried their teaching skills. To keep the classes interesting for the pilot team, our new co-facilitator came up with new topics, such as:

- What reforms would you start if you were the country leader?
- How would you reform the army?

Our virtual classroom was the only place for some to reconnect.

- What is forgiveness?
- What is happiness?
- How do you manage your anger?
- What is the difference between pride and arrogance?

In 2024, we started the third group of ten, separate from the previous two. This was a group of mainly younger children. The topic that interested them the most was how to make new friends. At that point, they had been displaced for six to eight months. Many had moved several times. Some lost connections with all their friends. Our virtual classroom was the only place for some to reconnect. Their first assignment was to approach a classmate in the new school and ask if they could interview them. The questions were:

1. Think of your best friend. What is the best memory that you have of that person?
2. Why do you consider that person your best friend? What are the qualities that you like about that person the most?
3. How many good, reliable friends do you have? Why do you consider them good and reliable?
4. What is the ideal friendship for you? What kind of relationship with your friends do you want to have in an ideal world?
5. How do you plan to strengthen your relationship with your friends? How do you see yourself getting from what you have now to what is ideal for you?

These questions, built on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, use the formula *high point past + best strengths in present + ideal future + how to get there*.

There was no limitation on the number of people they could interview.

There was no limitation on the number of people they could interview. Those who had a positive experience with interviews started getting invitations to birthday parties, playing together in the yard, hanging out together during school breaks, etc. In several cases, respondents complained about not making friends. No matter how positive the questions were, the respondents expressed no interest in starting a new friendship. Some were suspicious and unwilling to be interviewed. The most interesting observation, however, was the fact that some of the kids would discuss the difference between comfort and a solution,

and they would recognize the importance of asking the questions: “Do you need help?” or “Do you need comfort or a solution?” before offering their advice. Once they brought this up in the classroom, our new topics for discussion added items like:

- The importance of asking instead of assuming;
- The importance of starting with assumption of good intent;
- Making it a habit to practice awareness.

Moving forward

It became clear that we needed a sustainable framework for new facilitators and future students.

As our work expanded beyond the immediate needs of the blockade and displacement, it became clear that we needed a sustainable framework for new facilitators and future students. To support this growth, I began assembling a facilitators’ guide. Many of the lessons had been created gradually, in response to the children’s lived experiences. We decided to bring them together as a resource for those who might one day guide similar groups. I wanted to be able to consult my mentors and the specialists in the area of Appreciative Inquiry, so the book was created in English first. The Armenian and Russian translations will be available soon.

What has been especially meaningful to me is seeing how this work is finding relevance beyond our original online classroom. A member of the Ukrainian community in Vermont expressed interest in using the lessons as discussion topics for English teachers in Dnipro, Ukraine. A friend from Taiwan saw applications for facilitator training in his context. A case manager from Age Well Vermont shared the book with her colleague as a tool for supportive engagement with older adults. In these different settings – war-affected communities, international development work, and local social resources management – the principles of Appreciative Communication have begun taking on a life of their own.

One reviewer described the book as teaching “not what to think but how to think,” a distinction that resonated deeply with our intention when creating these lessons. Much of the learning in our sessions happened not through theory, but through the stories participants shared with one another – stories that offered points of connection, recognition, or resonance. The materials we developed were simply a structure that made these conversations possible, creating a space where young people could participate, reflect, and grow. Because of this approach, colleagues and friends in different contexts

expressed interest in applying the same principles in their own settings: in communities healing from trauma, in cross-cultural learning environments, and in professional fields where empathetic dialogue and strengths-based communication are essential.

Our next step is to develop a “train the-trainers” program so that others can learn to facilitate Appreciative Communication with youth. The main goals remain the same: to help young people stay positive and creative, to be bold but respectful, to improvise, to focus on what they want more of, to dream big, to be diplomatic and delicate, and to be assertive, genuinely inquisitive, and industrious.

Epilogue: Voices of resilience

On January 4, 2026, we gathered online for a small New Year celebration.

Late in 2025, shortly before the New Year, many of the children reached out to me with their holiday wishes. Several asked whether we could hold one more online meeting. So on January 4, 2026, we gathered online for a small New Year celebration. It felt like a reunion of old friends who had traveled through something immense together.

Two of our students joined us from Germany where their family had recently received refugee status. I remember the youngest brother as a newborn during the blockade, his parents struggling to find baby formula as they fled their home. Today, that same child is four years old and already speaks Armenian, Russian, and German. The older siblings attend both regular school and language-support programs, and speak about becoming a lawyer and a diplomat one day.

Our oldest participant is now completing her second year at Abovian Pedagogic University in Yerevan, Armenia. She is studying Communications. Another student from our second group is a first-year biology student at Yerevan State University and has developed a strong interest in neuroscience. Several of our students will finish high school in Armenia this May. One continues to grow her YouTube channels and design new digital art albums. Another is taking journalism courses and interviewing her classmates. Other participants unable to join the meeting that day sent greetings and updates. Their dreams include becoming a food inspector, journalist, doctor, lawyer, diplomat, psychologist, teacher, biologist, horror-story writer, computer scientist, and artist, to name a few.

During our New Year meeting, we talked about the possibility of continuing our Appreciative Communication classes for students now living in Armenia. I told them about the train-the-trainers program I am developing, and asked whether

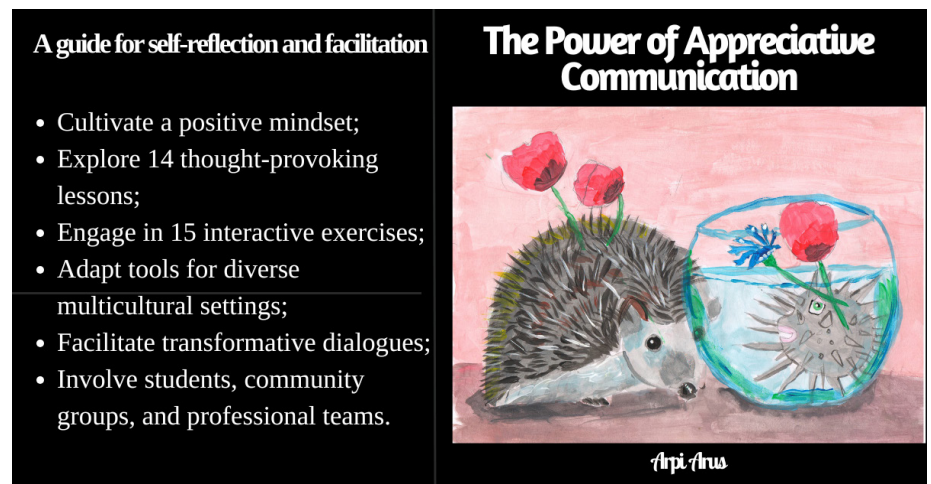
They loved that our online classroom offered them real leadership roles, not symbolic ones.

they would be interested in joining as guest speakers or teacher assistants. Their response was instant and enthusiastic. They all remembered how powerful it felt to co-facilitate. They loved that our online classroom offered them real leadership roles, not symbolic ones. Now they want to help newly trained teachers by co-facilitating online discussions and supporting younger students.

We also spoke about the idea of co-authoring a book. I shared with them that, in this article, I reflected on my perspective – what I observed through my limited window. They, however, lived the full story. They experienced the best and the worst. They learned resilience in ways I could never fully capture, writing alone. We decided to begin writing a book which will be called *Voices of Resilience*. It will open with my perspective, followed by the Armenian teacher's viewpoint, and then the children's essays, along with contributions from their parents if they choose to share.

They are ready to speak. They are ready to teach. And their voices will complete the story that began in our small, virtual classroom.

The Power of Appreciative Communication by Arpi Arus is a recently published book available on Amazon. <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0F4SS8K87>



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