

## Neil Diamond: A Personal Educational Appreciation of an Excellent Artist's Live Performances

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### ABSTRACT

In this article the performances of the singer Neil Diamond in South Africa are studied to enable the author, a lecturer at a South African university, to learn from Diamond how to develop on professional level. Since the singer announced in 2018 that he would, because of a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, no longer be performing live, the study was conducted in reflection on his performing career, which stretched over more than four decades, and the effect that it has had on the lecturer's professional development. Embedded in the theory of transformative learning, the methodology that was used, namely the 5D framework of appreciative inquiry, was selected because it provided the scaffolding for the reflective research process. After conducting interviews with six people who attended one of Diamond's performances, five themes were identified and are presented and discussed in this paper: the interaction between Diamond and his audiences; keeping up with the latest technology; Diamond's enjoyment of what he did and his enthusiasm about his performances; his neat black clothes and professional appearance; and his passionate immersion in those performances. To capture the essence of Diamond's performances, the author wrote a poem and painted a painting to represent what he learned from Diamond. The effect that his engagement with Diamond has had on the technology and decoration in his lecture hall is also explained.

### KEYWORDS

Neil Diamond; transformative learning; appreciative inquiry; 5D cycle; professional development.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the pop singer Neil Diamond (see Figure 1) announced that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, and that he would no longer be performing live on stage (Russel, 2021). When I embarked on this appreciative investigation of his performances, I thus found myself caught between the hard realities of human existence: the exciting prospect of the joy and energy that would emanate from my involvement with a study of the reasons for the success of one of the most exceptional and talented popular artists of our time, and a feeling of sadness about his illness. Diamond himself has the following to say about a writer's perpetual dilemma: "That's part of the test that I believe every artist has to face and either overcome or be overcome by it, the question being, can you write despite the intrusions of real life?" (Nieman and Lopez, 2011).



**Figure 1:** A recent photo of Neil Diamond (Neil Diamond, n.d.)

Diamond has been a successful performing artist for more than four decades. Except for the period between 1972 and 1976 – when he temporarily bade the stage farewell to spend more time with his family – he has, since the late 1960s, drawn millions of people from all over the world to his magnificent concerts. In a 2008 performance in Glastonbury, England, the audience totaled more than 170 000 people (Bream, 2009).

Diamond has clearly had the ability both to reinvent and to revitalize himself and his concerts. In so doing, he has undoubtedly succeeded in populating the collective musical landscape of successive generations of fans with the familiar sounds of his music and his voice. Apparently, he intuitively knew how to sing and interpret the familiar, often-heard songs in such a way as to make them sound brand new. Trevor Nieman and Jaime Lopez argue that, over the

years, Diamond's eclectic and universally beloved songs have been woven into our culture and become treasured pieces in the soundtrack of our lives (Nieman and Lopez, 2011).

I considered his South African tour a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study his performances and artistry. I wanted to open myself up, as a lecturer at a university, to a comparison of his strategies for capturing the attention of his audiences with my own teaching and learning strategies. I wanted to transform myself. To accomplish this rather ambitious self-assignment, I would have to engage in a process called transformative learning.

### **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative or transformational learning (Baden and Smith, 2011; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020) has become the most studied and written-about adult learning theory since Knowles proposed andragogy in the 1970s (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). It was developed by Jack Mezirow in 1978 and 1991 (Merriam and Bierema, 2014). Baden and Smith (2011) define it as learning characterized by self-reflection and self-examination, especially learning designed to lead to a clearer understanding of oneself. The concept, they also argue, involves reflective and cyclical processes of engagement in, and disposition for, discourse and dialogue to arrive at tentative best judgments upon which to act until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered that are found to be more justified and reasonable. Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) argue that transformational learning is about change – dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world we live in.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) hold that transformative learning is essentially a learning process of making meaning of one's experience. The individual learner is at the heart of the process (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The authors maintain that it is the learner whose attention turns to questioning and examining long-held assumptions about the self and the world in which one lives. One's perspectives become more inclusive, open, and permeable (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) argue that transformative learning happens by engaging in "real life" experiences and providing (or doing) activities that promote reflection, such as journaling or participating in arts-based activities. In the case of this study, I will be aiming to make sense of my experience of attending Diamond's concert to make meaning of it. I shall, by engaging with other educationalists, question my teaching and learning strategies, and the way I apply them in my lecture hall. I shall also engage in two artistic activities: writing a poem and painting.

But can an educationalist, indeed, study a musical performance to facilitate a process of self-transformation? Lawrence (2012) and Merriam and Bierema (2014) suggest that music, poetry, art, photography, literature, dreams, drama, fiction, and film could stimulate this type of learning. Lawrence (2012) points to the unique and sometimes disturbing way the arts have of waking us up to new ways of seeing: they cause us to slow down, to look with new eyes, literally and metaphorically.

Merriam and Bierema (2014) do distinguish between a cognitive, rational perspective in transformative learning, one that requires thinking, reflection, and the examination of one's assumptions and beliefs, and a perspective that is beyond the rational. The unconscious, emotions, relationships, culture, spirit, aesthetics, and ecology are at the center of the process. Lawrence (2012) suggests that art forms can be intentionally introduced in educational settings where transformative learning is required. She also points out that one does not have to be considered an "artist" to engage in artistic activities (Lawrence, 2012.)

Lawrence (2012) suggests that we must deconstruct our notions of how knowledge is created by valuing and introducing extrarational forms of expression in our pedagogy. In the case of my research, this raises the question of whom the research is for. She provides an elegant answer, one that guided me in doing my research, namely that artistic ways of communication research findings can be transformative for the researcher, as she or he must think differently and creatively imagine new possibilities.

This is exactly what I aimed to do. At the core of this process lies a constructivist approach. I shall now formulate the aim of my research.

#### **Aim of research**

The aim of my research, then, is to engage in a process of transformative learning – on both rational and extrarational levels – to establish what I can harvest, or have harvested, from my experience of attending a live concert given by Neil Diamond to construct, enhance, and develop both my teaching and learning environment, and the way I teach in my lecture hall.

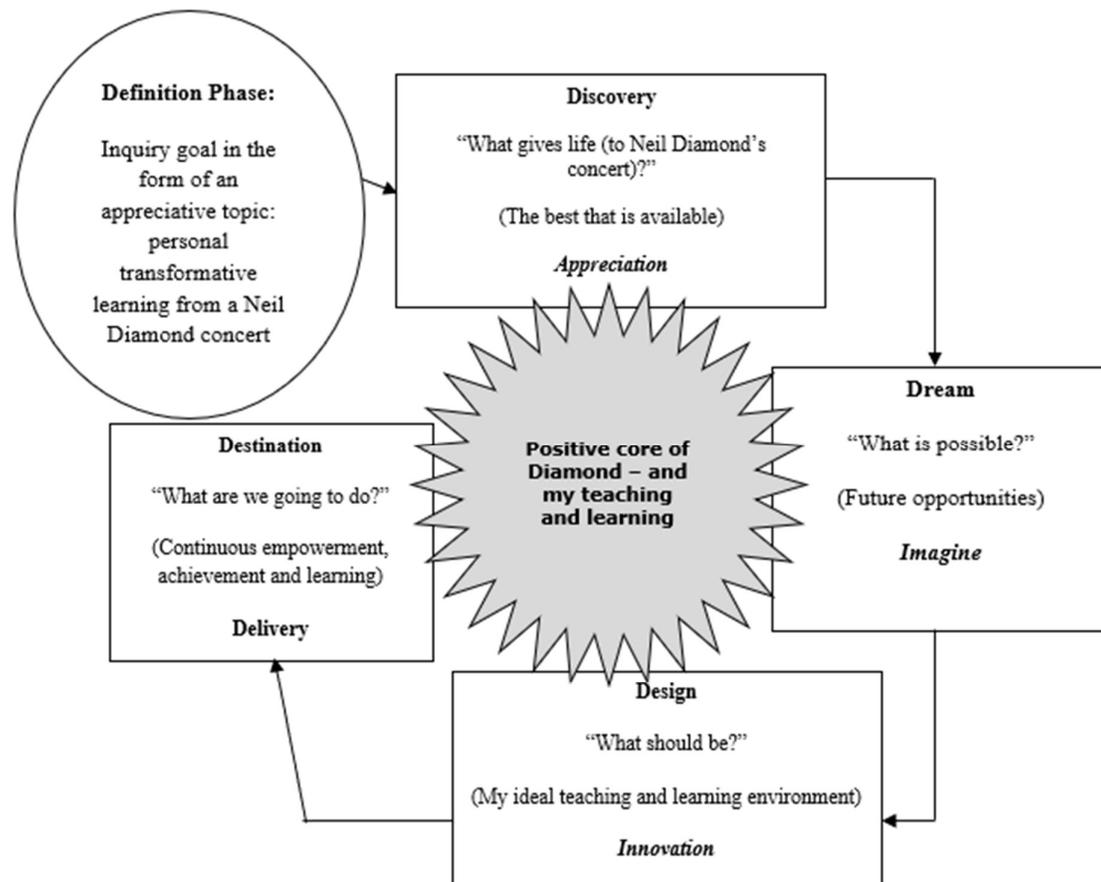
## **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Design and approach**

Van Vuuren (2022) kept the appreciative inquiry (AI) model in mind when she provided feasible and interesting ideas for teachers for successfully using musical arts to enhance teaching and learning. According to her, the "model" focuses on what is good and positive to bring about change. She then applied the so-called four-step model to structure her development process: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny (Van Vuuren 2022).

I shall rather make use of the more recently developed five-phases model, or 5D model, of AI (see Figure 2), which uses the following phases (Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011): a Definition phase, a Discovery phase, a Dream phase, a Design phase, and a Destiny phase.

Watkins, Mohr and Kelly (2011) and Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2020) suggest that, during the Definition phase, the inquiry goal or aim should be developed. I have described the process by which I have arrived at my research aim, which can also be called the *affirmative topic* (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) below – see also Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** *The appreciative inquiry 5D cycle* (Adapted from Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2020; Watkins et al., 2011; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Watkins, Mohr and Kelly (2011) recommend that the inquiry protocol should be developed during the Definition phase. I did that, and I have crafted and included eight appreciative questions (Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011) in the structured interview protocol:

- What, in your opinion, was the most striking feature of the interaction between Diamond and his audience?
- What did Neil do to enlist his audience’s cooperation?
- What did the performance mean to you on a personal level?
- How could he have improved his performance?
- How did the technical aspects of his performance (lighting, sound, stage, and band) contribute to the success of his performance?
- What did Neil’s enthusiasm and enjoyment contribute to the success of the performance?
- What did you appreciate about his clothes?

- *Passion* inter alia means “strong and irrepressible emotion” and “fervor, fire, irresistible urge”. To what extent did Neil’s *passion* enrich the performance?

### Sources of data

For the second phase of my study, the Discovery phase (see Figure 2), I assembled an informal study panel comprised of myself and six colleagues, all of whom had attended his performances in Soweto, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth. Jannie is the author and a lecturer at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Christo (male) and Suzette (female) are retired lecturers from the same university. Conrad (male), Annelie (female) and Lenie (female) are teachers at secondary schools in Bloemfontein. Elmarie (female) is a foundation phase teacher at a primary school in Bloemfontein and the author’s wife.

The sampling had to be purposive (Babbie 2021), since only a very limited number of educationalists attended the concerts.

### Data collection

Because the study was intended to be an appreciation, my aim was, as stated earlier, to engage in a process of transformative learning – on both rational and extrarational levels – to establish what I can harvest, or have harvested, from my experience of attending a live concert of Neil Diamond to construct, enhance, and develop both the teaching and learning environment, and the way I teach in my lecture hall. To allow for a social construction of this personal learning process, I decided to conduct appreciative personal interviews (Watkins, Mohr & Kelly, 2011) with the panel members, guided by the structured protocol developed during the Design phase.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

It was announced that Neil Diamond would be performing in the newly built 2010 Soccer World Cup stadiums in Soweto (Soccer City – see Figure 3), Durban, Cape Town, and Port Elizabeth. I estimated at the time that more than 120 000 people attended these four performances.

His performances in our country presented me with a chance to make direct observations of a concert of one of the most famous popular artists of our time. This apparently would enhance the quality of my observations:

The simple audience, as represented, for example, by an audience at a pop music concert, involves relatively direct communication from performers to audience; the performance takes place in a confined locale, tends to be highly ceremonial in the sense that it is a special event and the space of the performance is ritualistic, and the site has a high level of meaning for the participants. The performance and the audience response take place in public, and the performers are separated from the audience by clear boundaries. The attention level of the audience with respect to the performance is high. (Longhurst, 2007, p. 260)



**Figure 3:** Soccer City, Soweto on the night of Diamond's performance – it left me with the impression of a huge spaceship. (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius)

During the performance in Soweto that I attended I noticed adults of varying ages almost ecstatically participating in the performance. *Diamond heads*, as his fans are known (Bream, 2009:14), were waving their arms from side to side and, with beaming smiles on their faces, they were throwing back their heads and singing at the tops of their voices as he repeatedly sang "I'm a believer" and "Sweet Caroline". I saw adult men being moved to tears. Audience reactions of this kind are naturally not exclusive to Diamond's fans. Similar reactions and enthusiastic participation are indeed also found with other performers. Yet very few of the latter have been performing since 1966. Diamond was an outstanding performing artist.

Because Diamond's school years so strongly influenced his later life, I need to start the analysis of the results of the appreciative interviews with a brief visit to his childhood years in New York. This would enable me to establish connections between his life and his performances, which would in its turn illuminate and enhance what I could learn from him.

### **Childhood, School, and College**

About his childhood years in New York, Diamond had the following to say: "The fact that I'm from New York is reflected in everything I write. All my songs have the tensions, the loves, the hates and nostalgia created by a big city. It's inborn" (Jackson, 2005, p. 51). In an interview with Michael Schildberger on National Channel 9 Network, Australia, he even went so far as to say that all his music reflects himself: "Reality is that if they're [his fans] familiar with my music

they're familiar with me, because the music is a direct reflection of who I am as a person" (Diamond, 1976).

He was born in New York's Coney Island district on 24 January 1941 (Bream, 2009), the first of two sons born to Rose and Akeeba (known as Kieve) Diamond. The Diamonds were a close family who gave and received much love, as he later nostalgically describes in "Brooklyn Roads":

In the song, Diamond talks about a familiar scene, family dinner time, with his mother's command to go get his brother because his father's home from work, and their excitement to see and welcome him. He focuses on the evocative detail of the feel of his father's whiskers on his face and ends by asking "Oh, where's it gone?" (Neil Diamond: All-Time Greatest Hits, 2014).

His formative years were by no means easy (Jackson, 2005), in that his parents had a continuous uphill battle to make a living as shopkeepers. Also, street life in New York was dangerous because of gang activities and, at age 12, Neil was twice shot in the face with carbon dioxide bullets (Jackson, 2005). He was hit just below the right eye – a terrifying experience, which at that youthful age had a determining influence on his life: "After that, I took my chances on being alone" (Jackson, 2005, p. 1).

The Diamond family were forever moving house in search of better business opportunities, which resulted in Diamond having attended nine different schools by the age of 16 (Jackson, 2005). This lifestyle was forced on him by circumstances and was instrumental in forming his "internal, fiercely self-reliant personality" (Jackson, 2005). Jackson (2005) claims that he developed a pathological resistance to any kind of uniformity. With his copious singing talent, he became somewhat of an enigma to those close to him and he was, without exception, excluded from every circle of friends he encountered. This caused him to become a loner ("I don't fit in"), a necessary condition for his survival. This forced him to create an imaginary friend, as he tells us in "Shilo" (Jackson, 2005, p. 47).

In this song, he describes a common response that many in the audience could probably relate to, a lonely child who creates an imaginary friend who gives unconditional love and is always ready to play: "Shilo, you always came, and we'd play." (Neil Diamond: All-Time Greatest Hits, 2014).

Even in adulthood, he has retained the ability to withdraw into a protective world of his own and, at the end of 1976, he said: "I still live in a fantasy world sometimes, because it's safe. It's a cushion, a protective thing you build, and nothing can hurt me, at least in my own mind" (Jackson, 2005, p. 117).

In 1954, as a teenager, he started his high-school years at Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn, where his exceptional baritone voice earned him a place in the school choir (Bream, 2009). A fellow chorister – though they were both unaware of the fact – was Barbara Streisand, with whom he would later record the highly successful "You don't bring me flowers."

The year 1956 saw Diamond once more changing schools: he was enrolled at Abraham Lincoln High School, where he also sang in the school choir and developed a love of fencing

(Jackson, 2005). He developed an interest in writing lyrics as well, and realized that music facilitates social interaction and that it helped him to overcome his innate shyness (Bream, 2009). He would later write “Longfellow serenade” – a song of which he was especially fond, because it took him back to those schooldays when he was too shy to ask a girl on a date, but would then write her a poem (Jackson, 2005). Said Diamond (Jackson, 2005, p. 108): “I imagined the poet who writes the words he cannot speak to the woman he wants to woo and win. ‘Longfellow Serenade’ is not about a guy who writes poetry, but who reads some of the beautiful poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. And it reflects my own experiences too”:

“Longfellow serenade” describes early experiments with love by an uncertain, romantic, American young man. He feels that the night is “something he was born for” while being sensitive enough to respond to Longfellow’s poetry (“With only words to trade”) and to recognize the young woman’s uncertainty as well as his own: “For I was lonely, And she was lonely.” (Neil Diamond: All-Time Greatest Hits, 2014).

On 24 January 1957 – his sixteenth birthday – his parents gave him an acoustic guitar as a present (Jackson, 2005). He started taking guitar lessons, but soon stopped because he disliked his tutor’s traditional, restrictive approach, since he wanted to teach him notes and he wanted to play from the heart and this no one could teach him (Jackson, 2005). So, he taught himself, a further instance of Diamond’s aversion to uniformity.

Because of his above-average fencing talent, Neil won a scholarship to attend New York University (Jackson, 2005). Here he was also a member of the university’s fencing team that won numerous titles. Yet, Diamond concentrated on his song writing more than on his studies, and when, in 1962, he was offered a position as songwriter, he abandoned his studies with much relief: “Man, I *ran* from school to take that job!” (Jackson, 2005, p. 19). His career as performing popular artist could now begin in earnest.

I shall now present the rest of the data and discuss the five themes I have identified which contributed to Diamond’s prolonged success by referring to the responses of the study group members to the appreciative questions in the interview protocol. I should mention that, regarding the appreciative methodology I have been following, these responses and the analysis thereof still form part of the *second* phase of my personal appreciation, namely the Discovery phase (see Figure 2 of the 5D framework of appreciative inquiry).

### **The themes contributing towards Diamond’s successful performances**

#### ***The interaction between Diamond and his audiences***

Jackson (2005) gives the following description of Diamond’s concert performances:

Wherever he went, audiences for these live shows were nightly grasping at the confident, brilliantly dazzling performer Neil Diamond had become. His stage act had evolved into an extension of his personality; as such it combined an unassailable strength, which appealed to men, with a touching vulnerability that went straight to the heart of a

growing army of female fans. He depended on no gimmicks, no visual theatrics. (Jackson, 2005:83)

The photo taken during his Soweto concert (see Figure 4) clearly illustrates enthusiastic audience participation. Four of the questions included in the structured questionnaire were utilized to explore the members of the study group's experience of Diamond's interaction with his audience (see Table 1):



**Figure 4:** *Diamond's concert in Soccer City, Soweto: attended by an enthusiastic, almost worshipping audience.* (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius)

**Table 1.** Study group members' responses regarding the interaction between Diamond and his audience.

Team member	What, in your opinion, is the most striking feature of the interaction between Diamond and his audience?	What did Neil do to enlist his audience's cooperation?	What did the performance mean to you on a personal level?	How could he have improved his performance?
<b>Jannie (Soccer City; SC)</b>	One sees that he inspires joy in people.	He is successful at interpreting people's emotions.	He once again affirmed my life – he invested my heart with emotional capital.	I wanted to hear <i>I am... I said</i> .
<b>Christo (SC)</b>	His unbelievable rapport with the audience. He always knows what they are doing, is aware and in command of the situation. At times all stood up spontaneously. He sometimes stepped out of the spotlight and foregrounded his band. He was not always the center of attention. His audience was important to him.	He says he sees what they are doing and does the moves with them. His mobility at his age is very good. He said, "I feel at home", and so gets them on his side. He touched their hearts and acknowledged them.	He gives me confidence for the future – if he looks like this at 70, we won't look too bad at 70. I once again have appreciation for his music – I'm listening to it again.	Be punctual. The screens could have been even bigger, and the echoing sound could have been prevented.
<b>Conrad (SC)</b>	He inspires emotional responsiveness in his audience – his spontaneous way of talking.	He sang "I'm a believer" three or four times – involving the audience more and more at each repetition. The same goes for "Sweet Caroline". It's the repetition (of things) that is unique – the audience wants more.	How he enjoys doing it – the energy that he brings to that thing.	I can't see how he could have improved the thing further – he's good enough just as he is.

<b>Annelie (SC)</b>	He is at ease and calm and gets the audience to participate; one feels part of it.	He asks one to sing along and to clap.	It was wonderful to see one of my husband's dreams come true, and that with the children.	I wanted to hear "Red, red wine".
<b>Elmarie (SC)</b>	He doesn't react with great spontaneity, yet – when he glanced back somewhat surprised after "I'm a believer" and then repeated it another three times.	He only has to sing – he is so well known and loved that the audience automatically reacts to the songs they have already known for 30 or 40 years.	When I was a child of 10, he was already famous – so the opportunity of seeing him in person at 48 surprised me. I'd never thought that I would have an opportunity of seeing him.	He should have given an encore at the end – he ended rather abruptly. People remained sitting and were rather surprised.
<b>Lenie (Cape Town; CT)</b>	His movements on stage were rather stilted – perhaps because he is 70, but this was already the case in 1976. It did not bother me, but was rather conspicuous. He tries to get people on his side – he said that we were his friends, and that Cape Town was the most beautiful city in the world.	When he sang "Sweet Caroline", people spontaneously followed suit and enjoyed doing so.	It was a dream come true – absolutely.	Longer! I found it much too short.
<b>Suzette (CT)</b>	His skill at involving the audience and getting them to do things they never thought they would do.	His presence and how he presents the music.	He took me back to the past and made me feel nostalgic, travelling along roads I had never expected even to travel again.	I would only have wanted to see smaller groups, more personal interaction.

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How did Diamond manage to do this? How did he approach his audiences? Regarding his ability to perform in front of audiences of tens of thousands of people, he offered the following explanation:

Well, I see an audience more as an individual. I don't see it in numbers – it doesn't really matter. Once you get past the thousand people you cannot deal with them, you know, in terms of numbers. It's one person, whether it's forty thousand people or five thousand people – it's one person that I'm relating to. (Diamond, 1976)

With reference to "Song sung blue," in which he additionally employed the Australian audience as a massed choir in 1976 (as he did with the audience in Soweto for "I'm a believer" and "Sweet Caroline"), Diamond explained why he enjoyed singing it with the audience:

Well, you see, that song gives me an opportunity to put myself in a very scary position because it's one of the exciting things about doing a concert: the unpredictability of any given moment. That, to me, is the great fear and the great excitement. It's the charge that I get out of performing. The audience gets the music and I get the spaces in-between the music, you know – which are unpredictable, and I like to let things happen. So this song in particular gives me the opportunity to – to not only relate to that particular audience, but also to let things happen that would not happen anywhere else but at that very moment, in that air and in that audience. And for that reason, for the fear of it, you know. It's like the man who climbs Mount Everest and looks down, you know. But it's also enormously exhilarating and exciting, especially when something exciting happens.

He did however guard against an inflated image of himself and his performances by having a bouquet of roses on stage:

It puts me and what I do in perspective, you know. The tendency is very often, when you stand in front of an audience of twenty, thirty or forty thousand people, to think: "Gee, you know, you're really terrific" – and you turn around and look at the rose: it puts you in perspective.

He said that he considered a rose to be a perfect creation:

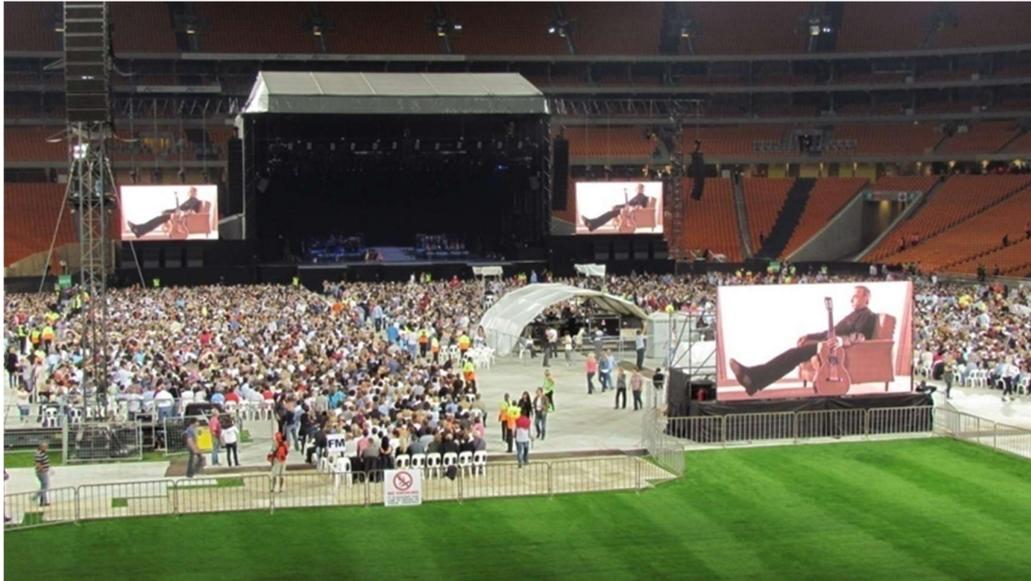
This is – this is, you know, a really perfect creation, you know. I'll look back at a rose and say: "God, if I could ever create a song that were that beautiful, I would never have to have any doubts in my whole life." But this is a – this is a perfect creation.

***Technical aspects: He has kept up with the latest technology***

Since the early seventies, Diamond has spared neither effort nor money to ensure and improve the technical quality of his performances. As early as 1971, during seven performances in the Greek Theater in Los Angeles, he was the first artist to use the theater's stereo sound system (Harvey & Harvey, 1996). He further amplified his band with a 35-piece string orchestra and used six backing singers (Harvey & Harvey, 1996). He was also prepared to experiment with sound equipment and, a year later, he was the first artist to use quadraphonic sound (Harvey & Harvey, 1996). It was during one of these performances (on 24 August 1972) that the recordings

were made for “Hot August night”, a double album – one of Diamond’s best and most successful albums (Harvey & Harvey, 1996).

The technical layout and production of the Soccer City performance as well as the excellent lighting that were used are depicted in Figures 5 and 6.



**Figure 5:** *The layout of the stage and the area in front of the stage at Soccer City. The gigantic screens brought the performance closer to the audience; on the left is the stand with speakers, cameras, and lights. The control centre for the staff responsible for coordinating all the technical aspects is in the middle. Seats behind the stage were not made available to the public for the concert. (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius)*

The question that I put to the study group members about this factor was: “How did the technical aspects of his performance – lighting, sound, stage, and band – contribute to the success of his performance?”

Except for a few complaints about echoes in parts of the stadium – which were apparently speedily attended to – and for respondent Suzette who, in Cape Town, could sometimes not see Diamond, the team members found the quality of the sound and the lighting to be of excellent quality (see Table 2).



**Figure 6:** *The lighting.* (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius)

**Table 2:** *Responses of the study group members regarding the technical quality of the performance.*

<b>Team member</b>	<b>How did the technical aspects of his performance (lighting, sound, stage, and band) contribute to the success of his performance?</b>
<b>Jannie (SC)</b>	The sound and lighting were very good.
<b>Christo (SC)</b>	One could hear everything clearly – though there were echoes at one stage.
<b>Conrad (SC)</b>	Incredible – the band is magic – he especially introduced them, and the drummer was unbelievable.
<b>Annelie (SC)</b>	Very good, although there was somewhat of an echo. One could see a lot of detail on the big screens.
<b>Elmarie (SC)</b>	It was amazing, especially as he knows them so well and they him. The sound and lighting were appropriate for Neil Diamond.
<b>Lenie (CT)</b>	Excellent – everything was very good, and the sounds that the band was able to conjure up were phenomenal. Initially a slight echo caused some annoyance, but this was speedily rectified.
<b>Suzette (CT)</b>	Not being able to see him proved to be a drawback – at times, I simply could not see him.

As regards the technical quality of his studio recordings, Diamond likewise was only satisfied with the best and fully committed to this aspect of his art. Laura Jackson explains his approach in the studio:

It was in Neil's nature to be thoroughly prepared when he walked into any recording studio, and he would have it set in his head how the sessions ought to go. Even at this early stage, he also exuded an infectious confidence while he set about laying down his songs with the recording engineers, and his style of delivery was memorable. He didn't merely sing the song. To the surprise of those in the control room, he performed it, and in such a way that the strong sense of rhythm running through him was channeled visibly in the way his body and his acoustic guitar would sway in perfect harmony with each other.

Brooks Arthur called it "a kinetic thing happening," and from his own position behind the soundproofed window, it frankly fascinated him. (Jackson, 2005:34)

Bream similarly observes:

[...] Diamond was "always a total professional," recalled engineer Brooks Arthur, who worked on those Bang recordings. "He was very disciplined at a time when a lot of artists weren't very disciplined. He came to work completely prepared, and he usually had a lot of ideas about how things should go. He worked hard, and he was always very courteous to the musicians, the people in the studios, everybody." (Bream. 2009:35)

### ***He still enjoyed what he did and was enthusiastic about his performance***

The word *enthusiasm* is derived from Greek *enthusiasmos*: from *enthuos* "possessed by a god, inspired" (Soanes & Stevenson, 2005:579). Diamond (1976) explained this idea of being "possessed" by a god during the 2008 "Hot August night/NYC" concert: "I'm on a journey, and it's a spiritual journey, for sure." Having uttered these words, he immediately follows it with "I'm a man of God" – the song that probably best explains how the spiritual dimension of his life influences his career. In this song, he describes how he uses what he thinks of as his gift from God ("when I hear my voice; I'm believin' it's His"). He thanks God for "giving me song" and at the end says that "the song I sing is the song of love," something that shouldn't be forgotten and should be shared with "every heart in need."

During his performances in South Africa these songs still generated so much energy and enthusiasm for him that the team members responded largely positively when asked what Diamond's enthusiasm and enjoyment contributed to the success of his performance (see Table 3).

Diamond (1976) also explained to Michael Schildberger why he could sing the same songs year after year without getting bored or boring his audiences:

"Do you get sick of 'Caroline'?"

"No, I don't – it's one of those songs that have sustained me. That's one of the beautiful things about songs – it's that when you do them well, they can sustain you

and give something to you for many years, whereas a concert or performance is the thing of the moment. It lasts for a period of time and it's exhilarating like no other experience that I experience in my life. But when it's over, it's over. A piece of music, a song, yes, ten years later, a hundred years later – still..."

**Table 3.** Responses of the study group members regarding Neil's passion and enthusiasm

<b>Team member</b>	<b>What did Neil's enthusiasm and enjoyment contribute to the success of the performance?</b>
<b>Jannie (SC)</b>	The spiritual strength that he generates when he repeats what he did in previous performances – and yet he remains enthusiastic.
<b>Christo (SC)</b>	A major contribution – perhaps 90%.
<b>Conrad (SC)</b>	Contributes a lot, because the emotional involvement is good, even though he has already sung the song a hundred times.
<b>Annelie (SC)</b>	This is very important because he has told people how it is that he has been able to do what he does for so long.
<b>Elmarie (SC)</b>	It made the whole performance.
<b>Lenie (CT)</b>	A lot – you could see how much he was enjoying it. He enjoyed the applause every time because there was a broad smile on his face. The more he enjoyed it, the more the audience reacted.
<b>Suzette (CT)</b>	I experienced very little enthusiasm and enjoyment because I could not see him.

### ***His neat black clothes and professional appearance***

In the interview with Michael Schildberger on National Channel 9 Network, Australia Diamond (1976) explained why what he wears on stage is so important to him:

Well, you want to feel very special when you go out on stage before an audience. It's the same way when you go out for dinner with friends: you want to, you know, and especially on stage. You have so many people. Color, the kind of clothing that you wear has to reflect your mood that evening. I never decide on what I wear until just before the show. Yes, it is very important and has reflected my emotional state also. When I first started to perform I wore pure black: black boots, black pants, black shirt, black guitar. In a sense it was a way of hiding behind that solid black front of mystery, you know. And as I progressed and grew older, and began to learn things, it was interesting, because the color has kind of changed into lighter colors and now, I find it difficult to wear purely dark colors.

Jackson (2005) offers a somewhat different interpretation of the black clothes Diamond wore at the beginning of his career, namely that they reflected a fundamental lack

of self-confidence and that in this way he had wanted to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. At the same time, however, he also developed a deeper, more intuitive communication with his audiences, to which the song "Brother love's travelling salvation show" greatly contributed. It demanded a strong theatrical interpretation, and this forced Diamond to improve his powers of communication: "It took confidence and a commanding stage presence and was the first of such melodramatic songs to form the core of Diamond's famously dynamic live sets" (Jackson, 2005).

But why would he now return to wearing black clothes on stage (see Figures 4 and 6)? In my opinion, the ageing Diamond no longer wished to be so conspicuously in the limelight; he merely wanted the audience to enjoy his music. As Annelie and Elmarie observed: it suits his age and his image (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Study group members' responses regarding Diamond's attire.

Team member	What did you appreciate about his clothes?
Jannie (SC)	He is very stylish.
Christo	Neat – he is always dressed to the nines.
Conrad (SC)	I now have to think very carefully about what he wore. I know that he took off his jacket at one stage. It [what he was wearing] did not have much of an effect.
Annelie (SC)	It suits him; it suits his age and his image.
Elmarie (SC)	His clothes were inconspicuous, but they suited a man of 70 – they suit him.
Lenie (CT)	Not much (laughs). He was dressed in black, with something shiny somewhere. I didn't like it much. Somewhere, in an interview, he referred to this – apparently, he decides what to wear just before a performance.
Suzette (CT)	He dressed as he should dress – stylish, neat. He was true to character.

### ***He passionately immersed himself in his performances***

According to Sue Cameron, *Hollywood Reporter* music critic, in 1971 during his performance in the Greek Theater, Diamond was a thousand per cent better than faultless: "The reason for the success is Neil Diamond's attitude on stage, an inner feeling of intensity that comes across to the audience like a laser beam. He showed many sides of his personality. He spoofed some of his 'dumb' songs, written during his starvation days in New York. Watching Neil Diamond work is like watching the parts of a \$5000 watch work!" (Jackson, 2005:84).

Lon Goddard of the *Record Mirror* is even more extravagant with his praise:

On stage, Neil Diamond is a shattering, exhausting experience which literally drags you, or softly sweeps you, across the spectrum of emotions from song to song. As powerful and intense as Elvis Presley, yet as defenseless as a kitten, Diamond is the biggest example of talent, professionalism, sex and mystery since Valentino. (Jackson, 2005:87).

Although Diamond over the years became more relaxed in his performances, it can be deduced from team members' responses that he still demonstrates the same intensity and passion of years ago (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Study group members' responses regarding Diamond's passion during his performances.

Team member	<i>Passion inter alia</i> means "strong and irrepressible emotion", and "fervor, fire, irresistible urge". To what extent did Neil's <i>passion</i> enrich the performance?
Jannie (SC)	He sings his songs with abandon and with passion.
Christo (SC)	He sometimes forces his voice, and even though this seems to harm his voice, he wants to get it across. Speaking about his song writing, he said that he likes what he is doing and that it is passionate. He holds nothing back. He withdraws to be able to write objectively about what is going on in his life. He is not ashamed to write about what is going on in his life. He enjoys singing about it.
Conrad (SC)	A lot – his passion is contagious, how he does things.
Annelie (SC)	To a very big extent. I was amazed that everyone was so passionate – smiles all around. So many people came to see him, but all were interested in him, and that is still special. He still sings the same songs, but everyone still enjoys them.
Elmarie (SC)	He is passionate about his music. Music is everything to him. His songs appeal to you. It was great.
Lenie (CT)	Though he appears to talk a lot, his lyrics reveal that he is a very emotional person who thinks deeply. He is passionately involved in what he does because he has been in the industry since the sixties – more than 40 years. To still be able to perform with such energy one must have a passion for what you are doing. He communicates his passion to people. There must be emotion behind his voice, otherwise people would no longer attend.
Suzette (CT)	His voice exudes a passion and that is contagious.

## RESULTS

I have indicated that, regarding the appreciative methodology I have been following, the identification of the themes and the analysis thereof still formed part of the *second* phase of my personal appreciation, namely the Discovery phase (see Figure 2 of the 5D framework of appreciative inquiry). I shall now describe the *third* phase of the 5D cycle, namely the Dream phase (see Figure 2).

What should happen during the Dream phase? Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2020) recommend that, guided by the themes, one should come up with two kinds of images to envision the future: a visual image and a word image. The visual image, they argue, can be a diagram on a flip chart, a skit, a song, body sculpture, clay model, or other form. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) add another creative activity: a poem, which was the one I preferred. I thus embarked on writing an acrostic (the first letters of the poem lines spell his name) to embody the themes, which would take me into the realm of the “unknown but imagined” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010): I have “extended the horizon of imagination as far as possible” through this “boldly creative” dream activity (I am *not* a poet):

No confirmation, always resistance, even pathological;

Enthusiasm and determined passion.

In a beautiful rose, a creation of God: it's magical

Letting us in in such a powerful lesson.

Diamond heads, all fanatic

Immersed in joy, sound and brilliant performances;

Attending something fantastic –

Moved to action: singing and jubilant dances.

Over the years, we always got the best technology;

Nothing was ever neglected.

“Disciple of God” this great man's theology.

Regarding the word image, Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2020:34) describe the *word image* as a vision statement or a provocative proposition: “It provokes action. It is written in the present tense because it's grounded in what is already working.” By describing the provocative proposition as being grounded in what is already working, an intimate connection between the past, the present, and the future is established. This is in line with transformative learning theory, since I have mentioned that it occurs at both rational and extrarational levels: it is not always possible to put into words what one has learned, or how one has changed. I shall, in this section, focus on how I have been transformed on a rational level. In the last section of my article, I shall try to put what I have learned on extrarational level into words.

My provocative proposition consists of only two words, which, to me, capture the essence of Diamond's artistry: *sustained excellence*. This, I believe, is Diamond's positive core (see Figure 2), and in the same vein it captures the essence of the kind of teaching and learning

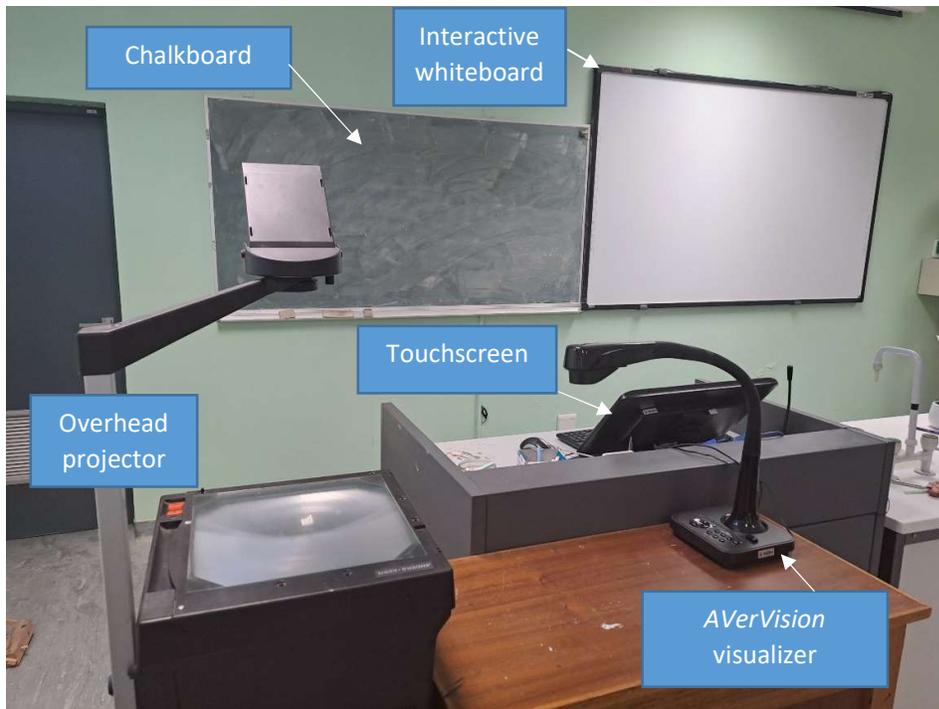
that I am striving to develop and present. Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2020) do indeed argue that, in higher education, the positive core is found wherever people are working in ways that enhance learning and enhance the mission and purpose of higher education.

After writing the acrostic and formulating the provocative proposition, I can now move to describe what occurred during the *fourth* phase of the 5D cycle: the Design phase (see Figure 2). Cockell and McArthur-Blair (2020:35) suggest that, during this phase, which is closely connected to the *fifth* and final phase of the 5D cycle – the Destiny/Delivery phase – one should ask the following question: “How are we (am I) going to make this preferred future happen?” How, then, would my engagement with Diamond, which has lasted for many years, lead to a sustainable, excellent teaching and learning environment in my lecture hall?

It is important to mention that, since I have student teachers as students, I allow them to present simulation lessons – they have ten minutes to present a (biology) topic to their peers in groups of between 11 and 19 fellow students. After each presentation we provide feedback, which is to be used to improve the result in a second presentation. This cycle is sustained throughout the year.

Since the students utilize the teaching aids and resources that are available in the lecture hall to plan and present their mini lessons, I have realized that, to create a sustainable, excellent teaching and learning environment for my students, I would need the latest technology in my lecture hall. I would need, with my students, to study the integration of information communication technology (Wallace, 2009:136): “An area of the curriculum concerned with the uses of technology. Although it is sometimes used interchangeably in schools with the term information technology, ICT is widely recognized as denoting the study of the applications and use of the technology...”

Since electronic interactive whiteboards (see Figure 7) are widely available at schools in the feeding area of our university, I decided that such a device should be installed in my lecture hall. Also known as a smartboard, it is an interactive display in the format of a whiteboard that reacts to user input either directly or through other devices (TechTarget: online). I budgeted for, and had, an interactive whiteboard installed. This led to students developing their skills in using this device. I kept the green chalkboard at the front of my lecture hall and an overhead projector next to the computer stand (see Figure 7) as well, and I am still encouraging the students to develop their board writing skills and their ability to prepare transparencies for the overhead projector, since they might be teaching in any one of the under-resourced schools in South Africa or elsewhere in the world. With laser-ready transparencies available for many color laser printers, these can serve as substitutes for *PowerPoint* slides, albeit much less efficient ones.



**Figure 7.** The “stage” of my lecture hall. (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius)

I also had an AVerVision visualizer or document camera (Aver: online – see Figure 7), installed in my lecture hall. With this device, students have a digital presentation tool that provides and captures high-quality images. In addition, the *Aver Vision* visualizer has one-touch recording, onboard annotation, and standalone wireless operation. An *Aver Vision* wireless visualizer is a video capture and streaming solution for tablets, allowing students to stream, present, annotate, record, and share live images (aver: online). They can also record videos for insertion into *PowerPoint* slides. Should the students prefer to use it, there is also a touchscreen (see Figure 7) connected to the upgraded computer in the lecture hall. This device allows them to face their audience when presenting, thereby making discipline management easier.

These devices have, and will, change the way my students learn. As such, I have changed their destinies in incomprehensible ways since I don't know which of these devices they will encounter and rely upon when they eventually start teaching. What I do know is that, when approached by students or principals of schools to write letters of recommendation for them, I do so with confidence, since I am convinced that they would be able to teach at any school in any country in the world. I do so with confidence. I am convinced that they will, like Diamond when performing, be able to teach with distinction at any school in any country in the world. To remind me of Diamond's habit of having a bouquet of roses on stages where he performed, I have put artificial orchids on the tables in my lecture hall (see Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** *The artificial orchids and potted plant in the author's lecture hall. (Photo: Jannie Pieter Pretorius). Like him, I look at these to humble myself and to remind me about what I have learned from him and his concert.*

### DISCUSSION

As indicated earlier, I shall try to put my extrarational learning from Diamond's performance into words in the final discussion of my transformational learning process. One could indeed just as easily ascribe some of the above improvements to extrarational learning, but since their installation is easily observable, I can consider them to be rational, intentional decisions.

An aspect of my profession that is harder for me to relate to in relation to the five themes taken from Diamond's onstage performance is the clothes I buy and wear when presenting lectures in my lecture hall. Have I bought them because of my admiration for the way Diamond dressed when performing, or could it be ascribed to my father, who raised me to be very conscious of my outfit? Since I have, throughout the past 40 years as an educationalist, put considerable effort into dressing in elegant manner, I would like to think that I have found a compromise between my father and Diamond, by stating that Diamond's costumes have strengthened my appreciation for garments like smart jackets, fashionable shoes, and beautiful ties. They might not always be appreciated by students, although I have received complements from them, but it makes me feel connected to both my father and Diamond.

I have also trained the students in the use of lighting in the lecture hall which, with two switches, allows them to select appropriate lighting for the type of class they want to present. In Figure 7, the lights in the front of the lecture hall are switched on, for example, but when a video is projected or a slideshow is presented, the lights in the front are switched off and those

in the back of the lecture hall are either switched on or off, depending on the requirements for learner activity. If the learners will not be required to read or write during the presentations, the lights in the back of the lecture hall can also be switched off to enhance the effect of the video or slideshow.

In that, the effect of Diamond's effective use of lighting is evident – although on a much smaller scale. The effect of lighting in my lecture hall is nevertheless just as important since the inefficient use of lighting often has a detrimental effect on the quality of student presentations. I had not been aware of the possible connection between Diamond's use of lighting and my training of students in the use of it. It was only after I had taken the photo of the "stage" of my lecture hall (see Figure 7) that I became aware of the similarities between the lighting of Diamond's stage in Figure 6 and the lighting of my lecture hall in Figure 7. When I finally made the connection, everything merged and I decided to (somewhat enthusiastically, I must admit) call the setup in the front of my lecture hall a "stage".

As the final creative act of my process of transformative learning I created a painting – if one could call it that (see Figure 9). I used my colorful oil paints to create a picture with, on top, a picture of a youthful Diamond during his *Hot August Night* concert in 1972 – one of the most famous pictures of the legendary singer. I framed it with thick, black paint – the color of his favorite outfits. In the middle of the painting, the words "Sustained Excellence" remind me of what I regard as the secret of Diamond's long career.



**Figure 9.** *The author's painting representing Diamond's positive core, and the provocative statement of this study.*

I have six years before retirement. The painting will be awarded a prominent place in my lecture hall. It will sustain and inspire me, and it will continue to change me. Only when I reach the end of my career, will the last stage – Destiny (see Figure 2) – of the 5D cycle of this appreciative inquiry finally end.

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