

AI Practitioner

The international journal of AI best practice

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Emerging in Appreciative Space

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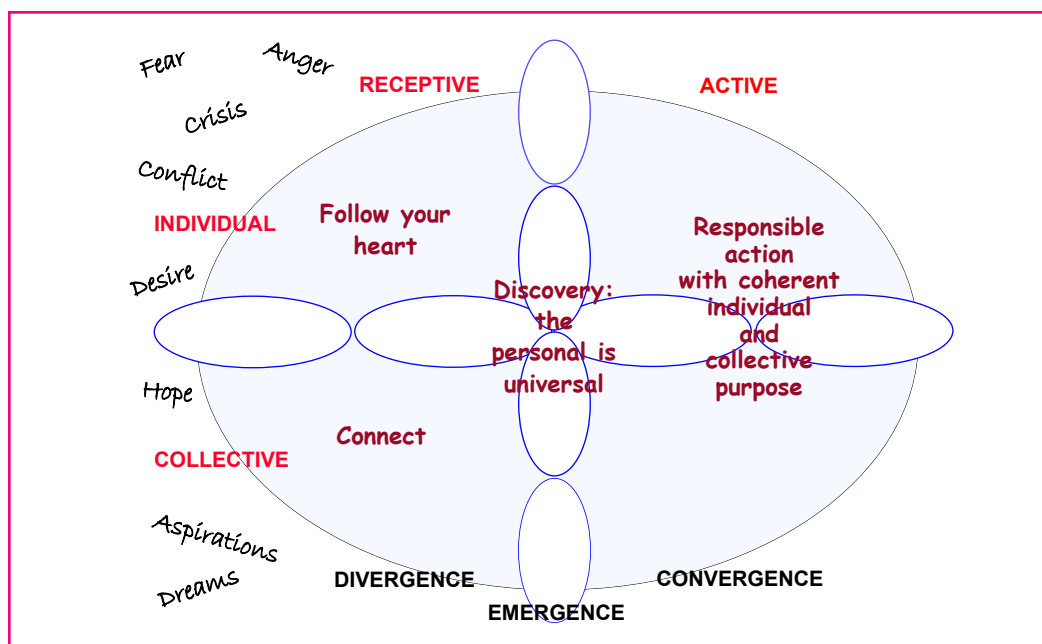
Why an AI Practitioner issue on Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space?

It began, as much does today, with an e-mail exchange. Anne Radford requested AI Practitioner ideas for 2004. I answered, "How about focusing on a process rather than a subject area, exploring how people combine Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Open Space (OS)?" Anne's response: "Great idea! Want to edit the issue?" How could I refuse?

Like many working with whole systems change, I am on a quest for 'it' the feeling of connection and effectiveness that infuses groups when 'it' is in their organizations and communities. I figure the more I understand this, the more I can contribute to a better world. AI and OS take groups there. The stories in this issue helped me discover why.

The Dynamics of Emergence

It begins with a disturbance: a client faces fear, conflict, crisis, hope, aspiration, desire. While welcoming disturbances seems crazy, it is the gateway to 'it'. Powerful inquiry – AI's discovery, OS' theme – defines the space. The inquiry attracts people who care, overcoming resistance to step into seeming chaos.



OS invites people to follow what has heart and meaning. AI drops them into their heartfelt stories from the first interview question. Diverse people connect with each other, diverging to explore what matters to them, individually and collectively. The collective reflects on what it learns and remarkably, whether OS or AI, the same themes emerge everywhere. We experience 'it' as we connect to these emergent threads and to each other because they resonate in our minds, hearts, guts and spirit. 'It', I believe, is wholeness, the intersection of the individual and the collective forming a diverse unity to serve meaningful purpose.

Emergence is the heart of wholeness, it is where we discover what is most deeply personal, what means most to us individually, is the most universal. It is the ground of spirit where new ideas, insights, leaders, and forms emerge and we converge in creative, inspired and effective action. As the stories in this issue demonstrate, when we support clients to grow their capacity for emergence, stepping into the unknown with confidence, they find answers on the other side. Through the incredible gifts of AI and OS they learn to care for themselves, each other and the whole, serving meaningful purpose.

Appreciative Inquiry is like a laser through the heart of darkness, making visible the power of affirming questions to connect us with ourselves, the other and the whole, discovering the universal in our stories. Open Space is a seemingly random walk through the night, connecting the stars into constellations of meaning, learning to listen and trust our own heart and that of others. It is no wonder the combination, the yin and yang of them, serve us so well.

Journey of Discovery in this Issue

We begin with orientation: the appreciative in Open Space from creator, Harrison Owen and openness in Appreciative Inquiry from long-time practitioner, Diana Whitney. There are also brief descriptions of Open Space and Appreciative Inquiry for people from both communities who will be drawn to this AIP Issue. Then fasten your seat belts for a world-wide tour.

Travel to Israel with Sharon King to plan the future of a worldwide NGO – Children's International Summer Villages. Enter the realm of executive teams and strategic planning with Larry Peterson in Canadian organizations. Have coffee with Christine Whitney Sanchez, working with the Chaordic Commons. Sallie Lee, Debbie Morris, and Birgitt Williams take us into a fast-paced, multi-layered, system-wide change in a large non-profit. Diane Gibeault introduces us to AI and OS in leadership training for senior executives in the Canadian federal government.

Ready for your next destination? Time for a stop in India with Anne Stadler and the Eicher Consultancy as it forms its future and says goodbye to its Founding Director. Carla Vliex invites us into the annual retreat of Unicef in the Former Yugoslavia. Then, we cross the ocean to attend a workshop with the police of Bucaramanga, Colombia, Kaj Voetmann and Sara Inés Gómez. We end our travels with an exploratory edge as Gabriel Shirley tells us of AI and OS in cyberspace. In keeping with the AI and OS theme, creating an open and appreciative virtual space at the AI Conference is the focus of Anne Radford's Viewpoint.

When David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney introduced me to AI, they said, AI is in its infancy. There is much to learn, keep experimenting. And, as Harrison Owen says of OS, welcome the strangers, they bring unexpected gifts. The authors were inspired by the spirit of these wise, robust practices. Many, including myself, aspire to 'being AI' and 'living in Open Space'. In the words often said in Open Space, be prepared to be surprised.

Peggy Holman, Guest Editor, November 2004

Open Space Technology and Appreciative Inquiry

Open Space Technology PRINCIPLES

1. Whoever comes is the right people.
2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
3. Whenever it starts is the right time.
4. When it's over, it's over.

What is Open Space Technology?

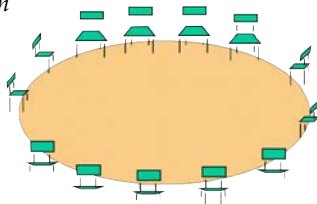
Open Space Technology enables diverse groups to tap the collective intelligence of the whole. By taking responsibility for what they love, people self-organize to accomplish what matters. Created in 1985, Open Space has been used 40,000+ times in 93 countries around the world with groups from 5 to 2000.

How does it work?

A compelling theme invites whoever cares to the circle. The

flow of breath gathers the collective in to reflect and disperses them out to follow their hearts. A bulletin board organizes the market place of ideas, all guided by the Law of Two Feet – the essence of Open Space – reminding us to take responsibility for what we love. The four principles flow from the law, a reminder of what happens when passion and responsibility intersect.

From Christine Whitney Sanchez and Peggy Holman



The Law of Two Feet

If you are not learning or contributing, use your two feet to take you where you wish. Stand for what you value.

THE STRUCTURE OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

The "Practice" of AI

The many activities, steps and applications of AI that are uniquely different in each situation

The DNA of AI

The set of 5 core principles

- a) Constructionist
- b) Simultaneity
- c) Anticipatory
- d) Poetic
- e) Positive Enquiry

The 5 core generic processes

- a) Focus on the Positive as a core value
- b) Inquire into stories of life-giving forces
- c) Locate themes from the stories & select topics from the themes for further inquiry
- d) Create shared images for a preferred future
- e) Innovate ways to create the shared future

The "Soil" of AI

- a) Research on the Power of Image and,
- b) Sociology of Knowledge (Social Constructionism) and
- c) New Sciences (Chaos Theory, Complexity Theory of Self Organizing Systems and Quantum Physics)

As presented in *AI for Organization Change: A Workshop Resource Book* by Jane Magruder Watkins & Bernard Mohr Jossey-Bass

Open Space as Appreciative

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Open Space begins with invitation. This is not about command and control, orders from the top to present oneself. Nor is it a strictly defined, carefully negotiated, select group of stakeholders. It is an open invitation to all who care, and care enough about the issue at hand (whatever that might be) to come. Doubtless those who respond will care in many different ways, but this difference guarantees the rich diversity from which innovative solutions can emerge. From the very start, Open Space is appreciative of difference and of the multiple souls that manifest those differences.

Open Space forms in a circle, the age-old form of community, as in a family circle, a circle of friends. There is no top or bottom, front or back. Those who come and care face each other, with nothing in the way. No tables, no desks, no rostrums – nothing. Without a word being spoken the common concerns and vital differences of the group involved are appreciated.

When words are spoken, they are once again words of invitation - an invitation to declare what really matters for each person. Their passion and also their willingness to take responsibility for that passion. There is no attempt to quell incipient (or actual) conflict. If anything it is magnified, and space is given for appreciation of difference in all of its richness. There is no right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable – the only criterion is that somebody cares enough to say what is really on their mind.

Open Space is guided by four principles and one law. Each in their own way advance the appreciative environment. The first principle, Whoever comes is the right people, reminds participants that those present cared enough to come – which, in and of itself, makes them precisely the right people. The second principle, Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, focuses attention, and therefore appreciation, on the present moment, thereby excluding all of the might-have-beens, should-have-beens. What is is the only thing present at the moment. Appreciate that! The third principle (the bane of all meeting managers) is Whenever it starts is the right time. This is an admonition to take things as they are and when they happen – a cardinal prerequisite for full appreciation. The last principle, When its over its over, is basically the flip side of the preceding one. Everything has a beginning, middle and end. All three must be honored (appreciated), most particularly the end when it comes.

The one law is a strange one. It is called The Law of Two Feet, and says succinctly, If at anytime during our time together you find yourself in a situation where you are neither learning nor contributing, use your two feet. Go somewhere else. Do something useful. Of course we have all been taught that leaving an unproductive situation is rude. Under the power of this teaching, countless hours of boring meetings have been endured – and to do otherwise would be socially unacceptable. And now participants are advised to do precisely

what they have always wanted to do. I think this is the ultimate of appreciation – of our time, energy, dignity. And strangely enough, it is also (I think) a profound appreciation of those in a group who choose to stay. No blame or judgement attached, just a simple recognition that this is not my cup of tea.

It is probably worthwhile noting that the Principles and The Law did not emerge through any analytical or judicial process aimed at prescribing what should happen. Rather they emerged as a simple recognition of what was going on. In a word, people are given permission to do what they were going to do anyhow. It is an invitation to be fully and completely yourself.

Laws and principles are interesting to read, but at the end of the day, the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. What happens when you open space? Lots of things happen, but a common characteristic of them all, or at least all the ones I have heard of or seen, is that by the conclusion there is an almost palpable sense of camaraderie or community. This is not to say that love and light breaks out in all quarters, but they always seem to peek through, even in the most unlikely places. For example, I was privileged to work with a group of 50 Palestinians and Israelis several years ago. This was not your standard “peacenik” crowd. In fact we had folks from the right and the left politically and religiously along with security folks and serving military officers. By the end of two day's worth of heated and pointed discussion, one of the participants (a senior advisor to the Foreign Minister) said, “The visual memory etched in my mind: smiling people, embracing, even kissing, a certain sense of intimacy in the Open Space.”

Perhaps it is flawed analysis or just wishful thinking, but every time I have experienced community of the sort described above in an Open Space Event, or in the open space of our lives, it all began with appreciation – appreciation of others just as they are – which then seemed to move inexorably along a spectrum from respect, to trust, to hope, to some real sense of shared intimacy. This is not to suggest that all issues were solved or that full agreement was achieved, but it is to affirm that the individuals involved openly respected (deeply appreciated) each other for who and what they were.

There is a continuing mystery surrounding the manifestation of appreciation in open space, for it seems to happen all by itself. The facilitator of the event rarely spends more than 15 minutes starting it going, and then never intervenes in any of the multiple discussion groups that form. The only plausible explanation I have found for this mystery comes from all we are currently learning about self-organizing systems. So if asked what is the magic of Open Space, my answer is always – it has none. The real magic comes from the power of self-organization manifesting in Complex Adaptive Systems, as the folks from the Santa Fe Institute would say. One might conclude then, that the phenomenon of appreciation is actually a natural concomitant to the ongoing process of self-organization. And to really go out on a limb – if it turns out, as many scientists would suggest, that the Cosmos itself is the product of self organization, perhaps the appreciative mode is deeply written into the process of cosmic evolution. Far out to be sure, but I find it a pleasant thought.

An Open Invitation to the Appreciative

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When Peggy Holman posed the Question "What is Open in Appreciative Inquiry?" and asked me to write about it, I immediately said yes. I had worked with Harrison Owen, the originator of Open Space, and David Cooperrider, the originator of Appreciative Inquiry, in the early days of these significant social innovations.

What is Open in Appreciative Inquiry?

As I reflected on this question my first thought was that Appreciative Inquiry opens the realm of possibility through affirmation and inquiry for organizations and communities to discover their positive core. It shifts from the polarity of "we/they" to the grace of "I/thou", opening us to connect. Connection awakens a sense of possibility, inspiring organizations to open to their dreams. And perhaps most radically, people open to change itself when exposed to the power of the appreciative.

Opening to the Positive Core

AI unlocks the positive potential of an organization through inquiry and dialogue into its positive core – its unique configuration of strengths, resources and assets, tangible and intangible. Tapping into and making known the positive core, opportunities for transformation, strategic advantage and success are opened. Consider Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division: During an AI based strategic planning session, approximately 80 people mapped their competencies and strategic opportunities. Conversations made it apparent that their core competency was less defined by windows than by the technology of bonded fabric. This redirected their strategic vision and business strategies creating highly successful non-window products and a new business unit.

Opening to the Other

Through appreciative interviews, people find themselves in the other's story, paradoxically accepting differences in that discovery, embracing new relationships and generating new possibilities for action. Time and again, improbable pairs – people who might otherwise not be in dialogue – build bridges. People of difference approach each other with respect and sincere curiosity, opening the door for ongoing relatedness and cooperation. Perhaps the greatest illustration is the United Religions Initiative (URI), a global interfaith organization founded using AI. URI now exists in 260 cooperation circles on five continents. Forming a cooperation circle requires: 7 people of 3 faiths working toward the purpose of the URI – ending religiously motivated violence and creating cultures of peace. Interviews and dialogue establish a foundation of respect, relational responsibility and shared purpose. Appreciative interviews open people to meet one another, learn about the other, gaining a deeper respect and appreciation for the life conditions and challenges facing the other. AI, at its best, creates what Gandhi described as "relationship enhancing conversations."

Opening to Dreams

As AI's anticipatory principle says, changing a human system begins by changing deeply held images of the future. AI opens the organization to identify, express and live into the greatest hopes and dreams of its stakeholders. It shifts an organization's inner dialogue from what can't happen to what can happen, individually and collectively. "We are the world's favorite airline," said Lord Marshall when he took responsibility for a British Airways in great disarray. Whenever anyone told him it was not true, he said, "That may be so – but your job is to make it true." His image became a guiding light to the future, a challenge and a worthy goal – one that many now would say has been attained.

Opening to the Power of Change

As AI is taught and practiced, organizational members gain confidence and ability in positive change. They recognize the power of positive emotions, relationships and analysis to create organizations that serve the triple bottom line – people, profit and planet. When Ameriquist Data Services learned about AI, they saw it mobilizing the culture among its 700 members. Facing uncertainty while planning three AI Summits, the greatest concern was how to manage the destiny process. People wondered how an already busy organization could take on more projects. At the first summit, new relationships formed, significant business information was shared and the organization was infused with energy and enthusiasm. Senior management opened the lid on the number of projects, supporting a self-determined process. Positive power opened high performing people to more time, energy and creativity, embracing change to meet business needs.

Appreciative Inquiry opens organizations and communities to listening, learning and leading from strengths. It invites and opens a space for whole system vulnerability leading to organizational learning and wisdom. It creates an appreciative dislodgement of certainty enabling people and groups to move toward higher goals, principles and practices without blame or resistance. By creating a safe space for people to share their experiences, hopes and dreams, and ideas for action AI unleashes collective energy and commitment to the whole. At the end of an AI workshop one young man said, "About a month ago an assessment said that I was not very creative. This week, another class participant told me he would like to have me on his team because I am so creative. A week in such a positive environment opened me up, letting my creative self come forward. I feel creative now. I look forward to using my newly discovered creativity, along with AI to get better results and to have more fun."

AI and OS in Service of Higher Good

I work appreciatively because it is congruent with my spiritual beliefs. It is energetically positive, giving life to that which I value, and being the change I want to see. Over the years, I have grown accustomed to comments like those from participants at the 2004 Parliament of Worlds Religions, "It was wonderful to talk with someone about what really matters." And, "Appreciative Inquiry helps people in my country meet without fear now that the wars are over." And, "I am so glad to be part of an organization that uses Appreciative Inquiry. It enables us to build bridges of enduring friendship among people whose life experiences and cultures are quite different. OS and AI emerged as bold social experiments to midwife the liberation of human spirit, voice and cooperation. Perhaps their contributions to global wellbeing and evolution open the human family to its next chapter.