

Open Space and Appreciative Inquiry Together... Online

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Blending innovative social processes - primarily Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Open Space (OS) - with accessible, easy to use Internet technologies offers great promise for enhancing their collective impact. The following story draws from several of my experiences in providing online environments where AI and OS are instrumental.

The First Meeting

A colleague contacts me about partnering on a project to develop an ambitious plan to alleviate poverty in a five-county area. There are eight primary project teams spread across several states and hundreds of miles. Scheduling meetings is a serious challenge among the five consulting firms responsible for various aspects of the project, not to mention the 200 participants directly involved from state and local government, community groups, Indian tribes, and local business. They need a communications platform with an asynchronous (on your own time) core enabling participation when their schedules allow. "Yes," I say, "I can help."

I ask, "Who is involved? What are the teams? Have they worked together before? Are they already communicating? Are they aligned with a common purpose? What about the Core Team? How are they communicating? What are they talking about? Are they open to an appreciative process?" "Yes, they are," she says.

Creating Online Workspaces

We create a Core Team Workspace, and then engage OS and AI principles with the team. "How do I know when to create a new topic," one man asks. I answer, "If the subject is important to you and you don't see it fitting elsewhere, create a new topic. Consider posing questions that challenge you. Share how you think about the question and why it's interesting to you. Reveal what it is that challenges you about the topic. Then invite others to join."

"Oh, I get it," he says, "This is a place where it's ok to ask questions and not to have the answers."

We interview the Team Leads about where they have seen their area of focus come to life (most have on-the-ground experience with a subgroup of stakeholders). We invite them to a conference call training session for the online environment. Next, the Team Leads post provocative questions for their team. The leads dial in, review the questions and discuss the similar themes across the groups. Then they are invited to post a title and description for 4-6 topics essential to their team's work. When the one-hour call ends, the environment is seeded for launch.

Providing the Environment to Support Emerging Needs

By the end of week one, 85% have logged on, reviewed orienting materials, and are using the environment. As the project continues, I monitor the “field of presence” with the Organizing Team. To me, “presence” means the direct experience of highest consciousness and deepest wisdom. It shows up as a profound acknowledgement of “what is” and opens space for “what will be.” We use different language for presence – Where’s the “juice”? How are things flowing? What teams show up fully? Which ones need a boost? Which ones are taking a well-deserved rest? Where are things expanding and where are they contracting?

After three months, we check in: how has the project evolved? Since online environments retain their history, we read through material already present, gathering themes, and reflecting them back to the whole. This generates provocative questions that we ask the Team Leads, inspiring a survey and inviting anyone to tell a story about ways the project is working for them, sharing via an online Story Collector.

Results, themes, reflections and common requests from the survey, stories and questions are reported via an online Plenary area. One theme might be: Be more aware of each others’ work and progress. We take this theme to the Plenary area with team report-out topics and add a Conversation Café where participants can talk about the theme, regardless of which team they are in. Another suggestion might be: A need for easier document sharing across teams. We respond by adding an online library.

Over time, the environment evolves “just in time” aligning with emerging needs. The AI-inspired iterative reflective process and OS core notion of taking responsibility for what matters established at the beginning makes this a natural process.

Conflict in an Appreciative Context

Conflict does arise online. In fact dormant conflict is often accelerated in this medium where time and space are altered from the familiar. OS and AI principles are especially useful in resolving conflict. We invite participants to notice when they get ‘hooked’ and to re-read what hooked them in an appreciative context. Since visual cues are missing online, understanding emotions and intentions is challenging. If the person stays stuck in the conflict, we need to take responsibility by increasing the communication bandwidth – we ask a clarifying question or have a phone, video, or face-to-face conversation. In essence, we open up more space.

Why AI and OST Together... Online?

Over time I have come to believe that what matters most in successful organizations is creating and continuously stewarding a collective field - what Peter Senge and others call ‘presence’. Both AI and OS create containers that invite and encourage presence to manifest.

Online workspaces also use such containers. In some ways they are more essential since the electronic world is unfamiliar to many and these containers build trust and create space for creativity. While many social architecture issues are similar online and face-to-face, there are differences inherent to the medium. For example, online environments are attractive to people with certain learning styles: reflective learners do well online. Diverse opinions sometimes surface more quickly online because of a higher sense of safety. For the same

reason, conflicts that lie just out of sight in face-to-face meetings are often immediately apparent online.

These and other characteristics of online environments can manifest emotions across the spectrum – from isolation and exclusion to liberation. Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space principles online create a simple yet sufficient container to include and transcend these states.

In one project with strong sublimated conflict and deep resistance to online environments, appreciative interviewing shifted the focus to what has worked and is working. The interview results informed the environment's design, turning reluctant participants into co-designers and built enough trust that key stakeholders engaged the Law of Two Feet to open up stalemated conversations.

Much More To Learn about Being Online Appreciatively

Time and space are different in online environments because the concept of the now travels with each person as they experience the site. An example, it is Monday morning and I am reading my Project Team Workspace. To me, Lisa has just said she will organize a team meeting. From Lisa's point of view, she said that last Friday afternoon. I notice the meeting invitation and marvel at her speed in handling her commitments. Of course I can see the date and time when Lisa posted but for me, it is my now.

The sense of space online, combined with the traveling sense of now lets us be in multiple places at the same time. This creates space for a breadth of participation not possible face-to-face. In online Open Space, you can literally participate in every marketplace session if you choose. Asynchronous online communications has naturally permeable boundaries of time and space so that 'the room' of the whole system literally becomes the planet.

These unique characteristics of online environments combined with organizational drive toward more dispersed and diverse project teams create a new frontier for human engagement, a new place to practice presence, reaching higher consciousness and deeper wisdom, using Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space online.

There are master painters and sculptors, master glass blowers and carpenters. In the world of online environments, there are few masters. The medium is still raw and the tools still being crafted. We are honing our skills as artists, consultants, facilitators and participants. We are learning that we can invite the very best from each other by continually opening space, asking appreciative questions, and taking responsibility for what we care about. If you do this work, online or off, share your story with me – we can learn together.