



Lena Holmberg

has a PhD in Educational Research, worked as a consultant and manager in an IT company and started the AI consulting company Apprino. With Jan Reed, she was guest editor of the November issue of the AI Practitioner in 2007 that focused on AI and research.
Contact: lholmberg@gmail.com
lenamholmberg.blogspot.com



Jan Reed

PhD, BA, RN has been involved in research for many years. She has a nursing qualification, and teaches and supervises healthcare students at the Northumbria University. Her interest in the possibilities and contributions of Appreciative Inquiry research to the processes of change has recently resulted in a book.
Contact: jan.reed@unn.ac.uk



AI Research Notes

edited by Lena Holmberg and Jan Reed

AI Research Notes carries news of AI research developments. We'd like to make it as collaborative and appreciative as we can – we know that many of you are working and thinking about the relationship between academic research and AI, and that you have news, comments and questions which we'd like you to contribute.

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Introduction

This 'Research Notes' column focuses on accounts of starting Appreciative Inquiry studies. In reading them, we found accounts of trying to find appropriate methods and research designs to meet academic, organisational and participant criteria. Some of this process is anticipated and some issues arise once the research has begun, as these accounts show.

What is evident in these reflections, however, is the way in which AI research is a participatory activity: it is not done *to* people but *with* them. There are accounts which discuss awareness and understanding of the different people who may

be engaged in the study, including at the level of approval, panels, reviewers and those who have responsibility for letting studies go ahead.

In this process of consideration, these people can be guided by many interests and issues. They may be concerned that participants are comfortable with the study, that they do not see it as hostile or focused on failure. They may be concerned that the study collects data in a way which will be valid, and the study will have credibility with external audiences.

While participants may use criteria which are, at times, mysterious or difficult, one way in which we can respond is to appreciate their criteria and motivations, and work with them. This appreciation is in tune with our research principles of focusing on the positive, and working collaboratively. This is not an easy option, however, and in the comments which follow, there are several that reflect the challenges the process of gaining support can give rise to. We also need to appreciate this awareness of difficulty: researcher and research participants all need to be appreciated!

Jan Reed, University of Northumbria and Lena Holmberg, Apprino

Accounts and comments

AI research: Responding to an organizational request

Dr. Anne L. Drabczyk, Ohio State University and The American Red Cross-Ohio
anne_drabczyk@yahoo.com

Ideas for AI research can originate from within organizations, and be as basic as fulfilling a request for generative guidance. American Red Cross (ARC) practitioners in Ohio realized they needed leadership training to address expanded organizational responsibilities for food distribution and shelter during disasters. Through AI, the cohort discovered and acknowledged individual, collective and organizational strength-based values.

The 'challenge' of this research protocol was simply meeting the cohorts' request, and this objective was satisfied. As a result of the intervention, heightened vision and leadership skills are evident. The best indicator of success is that the inaugural cohort of 22 participants recruited a second cohort of 30 members to 'benefit from the AI experience'.

AI research holds positive energy and tremendous potential. Because of an earnest research request from a handful of organizational visionaries, the National ARC is considering the Ohio AI protocol for inclusion as a template for the national leadership training program.

Introducing Appreciative Inquiry to research participants

Penny Hibberd, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK
penny.hibberd@canterbury.ac.uk

The participants to the study are from a wide range of people with different skills, experiences and knowledge all of whom are experienced in managing and coping with day to day problems in dementia. I was therefore surprised when the use of Appreciative Inquiry did not quite receive the accolade I thought it would. The participants were unsure when I asked them to think affirmatively, some saying

they did not think they would be able to do that. These feelings were not to be ignored and required addressing within the data collection. Participants were invited to tell their 'story' first; I listened and offered an empathic ear. The initial stories held a whole host of negative emotion and in some cases despair at the situation the person found themselves in. However, we continued together and with support over the year of data collection the participants were gradually able to focus on the affirmative with in some cases very personal positive effects. One participant has since written in a circulated newsletter:

Taking part in Penny's Ph.D. research looking at the positive aspects of caring made me realise that my experience as a carer could count for something... I am more confident ... contributing to the research has helped get me going again, being myself again.

As a researcher, using Appreciative Inquiry has so far been a rich experience, influencing a host of positive findings that I hope will benefit carers and people with dementia, and influence practice decisions in the future.

Confronting academic skepticism of Appreciative Inquiry

Peter Kozik, New York Higher Education Support Center for SystemsChange, Syracuse University, Syracuse, USA
plkozik@syr.edu

I admit to being swept up by the power of AI. However, as a researcher in Education, I discovered during the course of my doctoral dissertation using AI that I needed to be less sanguine and more circumspect if the results of my work were to be recognized as valid.

I tested AI as an intervention for Individual Educational Plan meetings for students with disabilities in schools. The results were quantitative, so I trod carefully to try and ensure scientific objectivity. Given my experiences, the following may be helpful for researchers using AI:

- Consider AI's effect on different genders, races, ethnicities and social classes.
- Understand your population. In my case, disability is itself a social construction and, therefore, the study and its results had to be viewed in this context.
- Handle study results as potential effects.
- Separate the positive feeling of AI empirically from the rest of your findings.
- Admit to a personal bias about AI.
- Probe the other side of your findings. What is 'positive' is not universal.
- Be aware of your impact as an AI leader as well as a researcher. If leader-defined forms of goodness are imposed, the results may be debilitating to team members and to your research.
- Recognize that healthy skepticism is essential to good research.

Why we have chosen Appreciative Inquiry

Elena Zaitseva, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK
E.Zaitseva@ljmu.ac.uk

Methodological dilemmas faced by researchers are often linked closely to ethical dilemmas – gaining access to information which could be damaging or hurtful to research subjects might result in so-called 'guilty knowledge' and the risk of unintended consequences for participants. We were facing all these dilemmas when starting one evaluation, investigating the impact of the role of Support Officers (SOs) on an employability-focused curriculum. The intention was to evaluate the role in a thorough way, looking at the impact on staff, students and external stakeholders, as well as taking into account the experiences of SOs themselves.

The constantly developing and 'boundary crossing' nature of the role means that its impact might be perceived differently by different stakeholders. Sensitivity of the topic and ethical issues involved determined the research methodology – appreciative evaluation of the practitioners' role. AI, which is focused on recognizing the best in people or the world around us, was the only practical solution.

Research in Progress

Problems encountered in starting an Appreciative Inquiry for the first time

Graham Lund
grahamlmsc@tesco.net

I am an engineering manager currently carrying out an in-house study into organisation-wide systems process improvement. The focus of this project is collaborative and participatory. It celebrates established 'good' systems (development) practice. The appeal of Appreciative Inquiry is in its rejection of a deficit-approach to performance transformation.

After submitting my outline plan for the Appreciative Inquiry within the company I had a 12 week period of inactivity while I waited for approval. During this period several attempts were made to discuss the proposal. Once a discussion did take place, it was apparent that the proposal had not been reviewed thoroughly.

After approval I attempted to put together a team to conduct the Inquiry. This involved gaining permission from other managers to use people from their teams. Although the initial answer was 'Yes', restrictions were added, the main problem being that due to individuals' commitments, which meant the Inquiry didn't start until February 09.

Continuing problems are occurring with the availability of the team as daily work commitments are prioritised over the AI meetings but it is still early days so I am staying optimistic.

Invitation to participate in doctoral research specific to Appreciative Inquiry and Coaching

Michelle T. Carter, Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, San Francisco, USA

mtc@socal.rr.com

A member of my research committee, Dr. Diana Whitney, suggested I contact professionals in the field of Appreciative Inquiry to invite participation in this study which will explore how a practice informed by Appreciative Inquiry can facilitate an adult transformative learning process within the context of the coaching relationship.

I am interested in interviewing coaches whose practice is informed by Appreciative Inquiry, and who have facilitated a process of transformative learning for a client. The total time required will be less than two hours. All research has been pre-approved by the Institutional Review Board of Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center.

If you decide you would like to learn more about the research, please send an email and I will forward you information about the study.

In appreciation, Michelle T. Carter

AI Research Notes will carry news of AI research developments. We'd like to make it as collaborative and appreciative as we can – we know that many of you are working and thinking about the relationship between academic research and AI, and that you have news, comments and questions which we'd like you to contribute.

The next column will focus on the distinction between research and evaluation, and how or if they are different. If you have any thoughts on this issue, please send them to us. In the near future we will also focus on the use of AI in Information Technology research. Please continue to send us material and suggestions for themes!

Please send suggestions and material to jan.reed@unn.ac.uk or lmholmberg@gmail.com!



AIP related resources

Impact of Appreciative Inquiry on Research: Experiences, Reflections and Thoughts for the Future. *AI Practitioner*, November 2007. Guest editors: Professor Jan Reed and Dr. Lena Holmberg.

DVD Impact of AI on Research – the Latest Experience. Workshop led by Professor Jan Reed and Dr. Lena Holmberg on 9th November 2007 in Gateshead, UK.

Available from www.aipractitioner.com

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Australia

Sue James info@bjseminars.com.au
Liz Mellish info@mellish.com.au

Canada

Western Gervase Bushe bushe@sfu.ca
Toronto Maureen McKenna maureenmckenna@sympatico.ca
Winnipeg Joyce Rankin jrankin39@shaw.ca

Colombia

Sara Inés Gómez sarinagom@cable.net.co

Denmark

Charlotte Dalsgaard cd@harbohus.dk
Mette Jacobsgaard 101572.622@compuserve.com
Henrik Kongsbak henrik@resonans.dk

Germany

Southern Germany Walter Bruck contact@wb-consult.de
Northern Germany Christoph Beck info@tricon-beratung.de
Dorothe Liebig dorothe.liebig@t-online.de

Hong Kong

Catriona Rogers c.rogers@re-authoringlives.com

Italy

Yvonne Bonner y.bonner@re.nettuno.it

Scotland

Margaret Wright mwright@resolution-scotland.com

South Africa

Bridget Woods bridget@fireglow.co.za

Sweden

Sven Sandstrom and Lisen Kebbe sven@kebbe.se

The Netherlands

Joep de Jong joepc@mac.com
Maarten Thissen maarten@djehoty.com

USA

East Coast Marge Schiller margeschiller@yahoo.com
West Coast Steve Cato scato1@centurytel.net

AI Practitioner Editor/Publisher

The editor/publisher is Anne Radford. She is based in London and can be reached at editor@aipractitioner.com.

The postal address for the publication is:
303 Bankside Lofts, 65 Hopton Street, London SE1 9JL,
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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

