

Appreciative Inquiry at Work – Lessons from Case Study Research for AI Practitioners and their Clients

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We are all social entrepreneurs who discover and create the world and organisations we inhabit. The research process for this study posed key questions regarding the ways in which AI facilitates sustainable organisational change. The principles of AI were consistently applied across multiple organisational settings. The study confirms that organisation change is dynamic and participant centred, and that a social change process such as AI supports people in transition.

Researcher Objectives

The research project drew together the lessons learned from multiple Appreciative Inquiry (AI) applications across a variety of corporate, government and higher education organisational settings in Australia so as to add to consulting knowledge and practice.

The key questions motivating the research were:

- What are the contexts in which organisations might/should/would benefit from an AI approach?
- What might the organisation expect in AI?
- What factors affect the choice of the approach?
- What skills and knowledge is required to implement the approach?

The Research Process

Based on my belief that we socially construct our worlds and our organisations, a social constructionist approach to organisational life was selected as the mode of inquiry and the method of intervention. My belief that we are all social entrepreneurs who through our ideas, beliefs, shared meanings, intentions and questions discover and create the world and organisations we inhabit informed the research process. The fundamental question regarding the ways in which AI facilitates sustainable organisational change prompted a review of a variety of literature including readings in strategic management, organisational change, large-group interaction methods and AI. Current ongoing debates around the use of AI on the internet were also monitored. This review of the literature highlighted areas that needed further exploration or silences.

Silences

The first silence concerned *shifting between two paradigms of management*, that is managing the gap or the transition from one way of viewing the world in an essentially hierarchical way to a more participant centred view. There has been little work done on how to assist people to move across this gap. The second silence was around the *micro strategies of large-group facilitation* in the context of organisational change. There is a lot of craft knowledge about

what makes a good facilitator; however we need to know more, in a scholarly sense, about what makes a good facilitator and why, in order to learn how to train them better. The third silence concerned the *implications for management consulting practice* in the actual implementation of AI. The key challenge here is to reframe problem diagnostic approaches to appreciative modes of inquiry in consulting. The fourth silence was about the *risks and tensions* of doing this sort of work. AI is a positive pragmatic philosophy and yet there is little discussion of the risks associated with such work.

Scope of the Inquiry

The scope of the inquiry related to organisational change and the topic of inquiry was AI as a participatory process method in the context of organisational change. The learnings from action research, action learning and problem-based learning all contributed in different ways to my capacity to undertake this research into applied AI. One of the key challenges experienced through the research process was my hybrid researcher-practitioner role. I chose to adopt the reflective practitioner stance and embraced the notion of relational self-in-process throughout the research process. I too was learning and changing throughout this research.

Case Study Research

The initial research plan focussed on a single site case study. This changed to a multiple case approach as the study expanded to include AI-in-process and the sustainability of the process in diverse organisational settings. Six organisational settings were selected using three key criteria. The first criterion was the key turning point in my learning and progressive understanding of applied AI. The second was the diversity of organisational settings. The third was representative participation in the process.

With respect to generalisation, the intent of the study was to improve applied AI practice through analysis of complex facilitation situations. These situations represent a rich variety of challenges relevant to organisations in transition. As Gummesson (1991) summarises, 'As long as you keep searching for new knowledge and do not believe you have found ultimate truth – rather the best available for the moment – the traditional demand for generalisation becomes less urgent' (85-86). Furthermore, the intent of AI is to be provocative and to develop new questions about what is possible. As argued by Cooperrider and Srivastva:

The core impact of sociorationalist metatheory is that it invites, encourages, and requires that students of social life rigorously exercise their theoretical imagination in the service of the good. (*Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, 140*)

The reality of organisational research is that it cannot be known in advance which case studies are likely to represent distinctive and informative vantage points (Burgess-Limerick, 1994). The hallmarks of exploratory research, such as this, are flexibility and responsiveness in the evolving research process (Blumer, 1969). I have thus deliberately drawn on case examples which, on reflection, represent milestones and turning points in my developing practice as an AI practitioner.

I appreciate that every choice of technique has been situational and improvised. I have made do with whatever was at hand in relation to exploring, appreciating and further

understanding AI in a proactive and highly interpretive manner. The principles of AI, the 4-D cycle process frame (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1996) and AI techniques were consistently applied in this research project across multiple organisational settings through facilitated workshop interventions. The AI 4-D cycle process frame involves the key methods of topic choice, preparing appreciative questions, designing an interview protocol, appreciative interviewing, selecting affirmative topics, developing provocative propositions, envisioning the ideal organisation, creating new social architecture (groups) for organising and learning, implementing, validating and further extending AI. The processes of divergence and convergence in AI, however, require flexibility and responsiveness to individual and organisational issues in-process.

Findings and Outcomes

Table 1 provides an accumulated account of the key lessons learnt from each case study. The summary highlights the accumulative learnings and developing knowledge and practice of AI with each new application.

Table 1 Summary of the lessons learnt from the six case studies

Case 1	<p>These lessons relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the complexity of the hybrid researcher-practitioner role ● the significance of the appreciative interview ● the underdeveloped and undervalued reflective capacity in organisational contexts ● the dynamics and timing of feedback to participants ● the difference between being appreciative and being positive
Case 2	<p>These lessons relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● the value of client commitment to a process of involvement and support for people in organisational change ● the value of spaced design of the inquiry process and the benefits of weblike AI interviews being conducted ● the process allows for multiple group planning and organising methods to be used within the 4-D cycle which can be infinitely modified-in-process to suit the issues at hand ● AI appeared to offer a macro integrating framework which had the capacity to deal with strategy, structure and culture simultaneously
Case 3	<p>These lessons relate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● early direct involvement by the client and the reference group in identifying topics and questions added a focus and a quality to the protocol which was sustained throughout the inquiry ● large group processes of AI including the pairing, small group and plenary processes

- Case 4 These lessons relate to:
- the development of provocative propositions and the potential to push the boundaries and encourage deeper reflection on the 'life giving force'
 - issues of language, creative expression and passion are central to developing compelling shared visions of the future
 - as more organisations move to network arrangements with fluid boundaries, the Dream Phase of AI assumes vital significance
- Case 5 These lessons relate to:
- the potential for AI to be applied by line management and professional staff to transform practice
 - AI can be an effective means to engage communities of interest in a common cause
- Case 6 These lessons relate to:
- trusting the AI process
 - the process helps participants to transcend systemic and structural barriers between organisations through their story telling and personal commitments to collaborate
 - the relationship between specialisation and integration
 - the capacity of the process to accommodate divergent priorities *and* to build a shared vision

Table 2 represents the general lessons learnt from the case study research about applying the AI approach in the context of organisational change. The general lessons about what is important in the process and some of the challenges and risks in applying AI are aligned to the research questions.

<p>In which contexts might/should organisations benefit from an AI approach?</p>	<p>What is important in the process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The organisational context is changing and there is no clear pathway forward. ● The client is committed to engaging people in the change. ● The client does NOT want to sell a predetermined vision. ● The process is central to achieving sustainable change as an outcome. ● The key stakeholders are willing to participate in the process. 	<p>What are some of the risks and challenges?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having the courage, with the client, to implement a process with no clear outcome. ● Identifying topics and questions which are tailored to the client's situation. ● AI developing into a talkfest. ● Contriving the process to achieve a predetermined outcome. ● Being impatient, ceasing to listen.
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Table 2 Lessons learnt of AI-in-process relevant to the research questions

	What is important in the process?	What are some of the risks and challenges?
What might the organisation expect in AI?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diversity of input is acknowledged as crucial to a sustainable outcome. ● Everyone becomes an active participant, willing to reflect, dream and be creative about organisational life. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Organisational participants are expected to put their values on the line. ● Everyone is asked to endorse the principles and process of AI. ● The client has a budget and is accountable for achieving outcomes. ● The client's values and behaviours are not aligned.
What factors affect the choice of approach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The client's willingness to accept the principles of AI. ● The client's preparedness to get involved in identifying the scope of the inquiry, the topics and the questions. ● The appropriateness of the 4-D model to facilitate a process for managing diversity and to acknowledge situationally-specific issues. ● The willingness to trust the AI process. ● The process consultation expertise available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● AI can be used as a consultation façade prior to executive decision-making. ● A low priority can be given to process consultation and relational competence in organisational change.
What skills and knowledge is required to implement the approach?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Modeling an appreciative mindset in the application of AI principles and practices. ● Active participation in the 4-D process of Discovering, Dreaming, Designing and Delivering. ● Making sense of the data in ways that enable participants to recognise and own their data. ● Management of facilitation paradoxes; planned spontaneity and focused flexibility throughout the process. ● Tailored communication to the client context and skill to infinitely reframe negative and cynical contributions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Being seen as Pollyanna, that is positive as opposed to appreciative. ● Conflicting agendas and cynicism in organisational change challenge and overwhelm. ● The drive for solutions can railroad discovery and dreaming processes resulting in rushed and contrived storytelling and careless propositions. ● Alignment with a power group compromises facilitation.

Conclusion

The case study research confirms that organisational change is a dynamic, participant centred process in which multiple realities and collaborative interactions may be drawn together to build a shared vision. The cases provide stories of AI being used in the context of organisational change to build commitment in change and to build shared visions of the future. Based on the case study reports and the experience of applying AI-in-process, the potential of AI as a large-group interaction method for sustainable organisational change has been identified. Organisations large and small in Australia are undergoing continuous transformation. The case study findings indicate that a social change process, such as AI, supports people in transition. AI represents a viable alternative to coercive, dictatorial and unsustainable approaches to organisational change and therefore provides a process to democratise strategy, build commitment in the process and sustain energy for change.

Anne Radford
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Strength-based Leadership: Applying Appreciative Inquiry Principles and Process

AI WORKSHOP	November 15-16, 2007		INFORMATION
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Purpose of the Workshop

The workshop will address the significant paradigm shift in leadership, by

- § Looking at the changes taking place in leadership
- § Reviewing the contribution of "classical" leadership models
- § Accepting the challenge to think systemically and lead through language and dialogue

Workshop leaders:
Julian Rizzello and Anne Radford

Date and Venue:
15 - 16 November 2007, London

For more info, visit www.aradford.co.uk
To register for the workshop, visit <http://www.aipractitioner.com/NewShop/courses.htm>