

Harvesting words and concepts



An
AI-learner

BY RUSSELL KERKHOVEN

Participant Russell Kerkhoven looks back on his experiences in the 2012 World Appreciative Inquiry Conference. What a week!

For five days, I was embedded in the thought and language world of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Days later I seek to make sense of the impressions, connections and inspirational words. For me – an AI-learner – the conference was rich enough to enable many different search angles to be followed. Presentations and quotes can be found by tracing the outputs of the conference media-crew. I recommend you browse the conference website www.2012waic.com and select appealing titles.

Overall the focus on questions and the commitment to craft questions to fit the audience, issue and stage of inquiry, showed the need to respect the emergent nature of an (appreciative) inquiry process.

The pre-conference with David Cooperrider treated us to a host of insights and conversations with new people. David asked us: 'If we want to explore whole-system change, this requires moving out of our comfort zones of small groups and small incremental shifts. Where might an AI approach multiply value in your work, business and life?'

David gave an impressive example of using an appreciative approach in connecting with his children through sports. He also pinpointed the need for a balanced inner dialogue that enables you to stride along and step out of the box. For this a positive image of the future, positive emotions, an 'open' mind and self-acceptance are paramount.

David questioned the group size with which we generally work. Effective groups are often considered to be around seven people. He challenges us to explore these forms of closure with creativity as AI practitioners are increasingly showing that whole system change can be achieved through AI summits at scale! David asked: 'Could it be that we have created this belief in effective group size based on our old deficit-based thinking? Because we feel comfortable with this size? Have we sought to develop strengths in dealing with large groups of diverse stakeholders?' The animated table conversations suggest that many do indeed have experience with larger groups. Maybe we should draw on these experiences?

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It was exciting to discover the close link between social constructionism and Appreciative Inquiry. The plenary on social constructionism and the ongoing dialogues, exploring abstract notions was acted out powerfully by Kenneth Gergen and Danielle Zandee. The conversations emphasized that AI is a philosophy and not just a happy positive method. As an inquiry method, AI consequently emphasizes the importance of crafting the right questions.

Micro practices such as active listening and using the imaginative eye form building blocks for craftsmanship. Active engagement through dialogue, creating space to think and playing with your inner dialogue are distinctive of successful AI practitioners.

Starting a plenary dialogue with Ronald Fry, Gervase Bushe acknowledges that 50 per cent of his AI interventions failed, this success rate compares favorably with other change paradigms. Gervase said: 'Do not be blinded by the notion of newness. What counts is that the idea is compelling to take action people hear it and want to join in ... Generativity is more than a thought process. It is about what's happening with the ideas. Strands of experiences that are special, energize people to take action.' Generative design, generative connection is a beckoning horizon that can be reached during the AI-process. Ron Fry said: 'appreciation tends to rise above inquiry and positivity attracts and becomes an end in itself'

Methodologically, they explain, the AI Destiny phase can be confusing and unclear, emphasizing the need for frequent improvisation in this phase.

More excitement came with Klaas van Egmond, who spoke at a lightning speed, using powerful imagery with myths, art and fairy tale personas. He started his keynote with the Eagles' song 'Hotel California' and he explains that at this point in 'our' civilisation 'we are in this together, there is no way back, only forward!' To achieve this he makes an electrifying plea for redefining our societal values and cautions us against the small world of the I. Klaas favours the idea of a dynamic balance, that reconciles opposites.

Leo Bormans – in a hi-speed and spirited performance – spotted mega trends and shared micro moments as an active citizen. Believe in happiness and do something with that 'wisdom'. Hope is something we can choose! Pessimists are not in the majority, they just happen to make more noise', Leo said. He calls for including an irrational dimension of participation and ends with: 'kind men create mankind.'

Emerging from this all, I warmly recommend embracing the Appreciative Inquiry attitude and position. You can have so much more fun. Starting from what is can be so infinitely more rewarding.

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