AI Practitioner

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Wired Discovery: New Conversations and Deeper Connections

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Potential energy can be thought of as energy stored within a physical system. This energy can be released or converted into other forms of energy, including kinetic energy. It is called potential energy because it has the potential to change the states of objects in the system when the energy is released. Wikipedia

There appears to be a compelling resemblance between that latent, untapped state of energy, called potential, and this moment in time for Appreciative Inquiry. The power of AI is ready to be transformed, amplifying generative change through the infusion of new media and online technologies.

In this issue of *AI Practitioner*, we will venture into the domain of technology. We will offer you the chance to investigate the possibilities for digitally collecting, sharing, visualizing, reflecting and collectively understanding within AI, sometimes as adjuncts to face-to-face engagements, at others exclusively using the internet. It has been our aim in assembling this collection of articles to represent the variations of online tools, the ways in which practitioners are using them, and how they are adding rich texture to the experiences and insights gleaned about the best of what is.

The Digital Shift

A natural question is, 'Why investigate this topic now?' The integration of online life in all aspects of contemporary work and personal roles has shifted from a debate about the possibilities, pro and con, to a significant reality. In barely 15 years the World Wide Web has gone from a rumor to a roar. Information flow is a constant. Digital images and sound are common place. The concept of networks has been redefined.

Consultants who are able to see past the hype about new web technology have come to understand that the growing interest in human networking and the sharing of experiences online have the potential to alter and disaggregate customary sources of internal information and traditional methods of facilitating change in organizations. People are consumers and creators of vast amounts of information which they transmit formally and informally, in their personal lives and professional roles. They have become accustomed to the transparency of sharing what they experience and understand through online connections and collaborations. Technology is here. It enables dialogue, interaction and participation, and shapes human behavior. As Chris Heuer, a noted media commentator, has stated:

> Because participation is more broadly available across society, it is the contexts in which we interact with others that is most crucial – within those contexts we communicate with each other and if through those communications, we reach agreement to trust one another, we can collaborate towards common goals. Social Media Club, March, 2008

Capacity of AI to Integrate Technology

The question still looms, 'Is there a comfortable, authentic fit for online technology for the beneficiaries of AI (our clients) and the AI thought leaders and caretakers (the scholars and practitioners)?' For the editors of this issue, the answer is a confident 'YES'. This confidence is based on our collective belief that the core principles and values of AI come first. The intention of Appreciative Inquiry to make the stories of human achievement noticeable and accessible to the people who need to reframe their experience, as a source of strength for the future, is honored and expanded when inquiry is considered first and web-based tools chosen second.

Social software is less about new web technology than it is about the way that these technologies are being used to augment ordinary human interaction and behavior. Since AI addresses the socio-technical aspects of transformation, it is essential, in our view, to opt for technologies that support those activities. The client deserves appropriate online tools that attend to individual and large group communication and enhance human relationships as people move through the 4D Cycle of inquiry, storytelling, meaning-making, creative expression, pattern definition and reflection. At the same time, AI participants benefit from technologies that aid in mapping, analyzing, decision making, restructuring, aligning, authoring and collectively tracking accomplishment. While expanding co-creation and ownership of the organizational future as the boundaries of time and location are minimized, these tools must allow the heartbeat of AI to be distinct and audible.

Experimentation and Tinkering

When you are operating on the edge, every step is an innovation and everyone involved is an explorer. You will notice that few of the authors have formal skills in computer technology or programming. They have picked up the capabilities and learned the language of engaging in online AI practices through trial and success. We have found that many of the technologies and techniques applied in blended or online AI started with trying out whatever was available, at a time when relying on more conventional approaches would have defeated the project or reduced its effectiveness. Numerous times this means ferreting out free software

with a search engine, reading blogs for suggestions, or posting questions to listservs. Tryouts and successive tweaking, replacements of early tools and the additions of new ones, and watchful support of participants are frequently what have sustained the early adopters of digital complements to AI. In our own experience, the hunt for new technology tools has become a constant pursuit since there is always something new to try.

What You Will Find in This Issue

For a few daring AI practitioners, the touch-points of meaningful inquiry in a wired world have inspired exploration with new digital tools and schemes. We have selected an array of articles that feature their experiences and highlight distinctive AI cases from North America and Europe.

In 'New Models of Appreciative Inquiry in the Digital Age', Lindsey Godwin and Soren Kaplan suggest four models of technology integration that they have observed in a variety of AI processes. You will learn about their vision for how the underlying tools and principles of these models will continue to contribute to the future of the field.

The need to fulfill the US Department of Homeland Security's mandate for disaster preparedness propelled Anne Drabczyk's AI-based leadership development program to incorporate video-on-demand (vodcast) technology. Read 'Digital Dialogues: Enriched Discovery For A Leadership Development Cohort' for the story of how she and participating community leaders expanded the reach of her program, and then login to see the results of their efforts.

Carol Richmond's case 'Using Technology: An Appreciative Paradigm of Learning in Online Courses' describes the ways in which online course features, email and cell phones were used to collect stories and themes for a research study.

'Meaning Making in Real Time: Igniting the Fire Over the Wire' highlights the imperative for the emerging use of technology in the nonprofit sector. Authors Roselyn Kay, Tony Silbert and David Styers give us a birds-eye view of how 360 centers mobilizing millions of volunteers used synchronous web conferencing technology to create highly energizing and engaging provocative propositions and a powerful new vision statement.

The compelling issues of saving lives in Saskatchewan, Canada come alive in Jeannette Aschenbrenner's piece 'Healthcare Seeks to Enhance the Power of Story Through On-line Appreciative Inquiry Interviews'. She demonstrates how AI and technology support both the qualitative and quantitative data analysis needs that are the norm in hospital administration.

Online collaboration also plays an important role in launching and sustaining a large and growing community of AI practitioners in Europe. This is underscored as Leif Josefsson and Lena Holmberg tell the story and illustrate the online tools in 'Using the Web to Support Organic Development of the European AI Network'.

The groundbreaking nature of embedding technology in AI becomes clear in Pascal Kaplan's 'Expanding the Reach of the Appreciative Inquiry Summit with Collaborative Technology'. He describes projects that have ranged from enabling thousands of participants to take part in asynchronous online AI experiences from World Vision, to more recent synchronous online and real-time AI in a project initiated by the American Society of Association Executives.

Where will the shift in the search for the positive core take us next? Gabriel Shirley suggests that it may be taking 'crowdsourcing', a term coined in Wired magazine, to a new application in social collaboration. 'CrowdSourcing: Self-organized Discovery through Chaordic Organization' features prospects for supporting collective wisdom in scalable digital story gathering.

Some Final Thoughts

Edges are the peripheries of the global business environment, the places where innovation potential is the highest. In today's fast-moving business world, playing on the edge increasingly is the best way to gain an edge.

John Hagel and John Seeley Brown

As you consider the implications of fostering appreciative change intertwined with web based tools, we urge you to tap into the strengths that brought AI into your way of life and work. It's still about encouraging change. To trigger this change, reframing assumptions about the intrusion of technology will be necessary for many AI consultants. Instead of imagining that computers, cell phones, web cams and podcasts spell disaster for human inquiry, envision a world where they have raised its effectiveness and expansiveness for you and the work yet to come. We promise – this will be exciting!

Loretta L. Donovan, Gabriel Shirley and Sue Anderson Derby
Guest Editors, May 2008

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