

CrowdSourcing: Self-organized Discovery through Chaordic Organization

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The emergence of social networking technologies has opened a new area of exploration for the Appreciative Inquiry Discovery process. It is now possible to invite hundreds, thousands or even millions of people to participate. In August 2007, at the Story Field Conference in Colorado, I invited people to participate in a CrowdSourcing experiment, which helped inspire a subgroup of participants to begin the Tell-A-Vision initiative. The potential of CrowdSourcing is vast. The challenge is weaving technologies together with enough structure to enable creative participation without inflexibility or complexity.

The emergence of social networking technologies and their widespread use has opened a new area of exploration for the Appreciative Inquiry Discovery process. It is now possible to invite thousands of people to participate in a Discovery, submitting stories using text, audio, art and video, then collaborating in the process of discovering story themes and patterns that uplift the wisdom present in the collective. I call this gathering of collective wisdom, perspective and capacity 'CrowdSourcing'.

CrowdSourcing is now possible because in the last few years technology has reached a new level of portability, usability and integration with our daily lives. Most people in the western world carry cell phones that are also cameras and (at least rudimentary) typing devices. Technology-enabled services such as www.AudioAcrobat.com and www.FreeConferenceCall.com make it easy and inexpensive to set up and record telephone interviews. Web platforms such as PBWiki and SocialText make it easy to create sites dedicated to specific initiatives and invite everyone involved to participate in site creation and editing. There are so many options, in fact, that to most people it feels like a chaotic world of digital choices.

Recently, along with others, I have been experimenting with what I believe may be the future of self-organized collective Discovery. In August 2007 at the Story Field Conference in Colorado (see *AI Practitioner*, February 2008 for additional stories about this conference), I invited anyone interested to participate in a CrowdSourcing experiment. Each person was invited to use digital media to 'capture the stories of the conference' from a perspective meaningful to them. They set off with pen and paper, laptops, iPhones, still and video cameras and audio recorders with 'free rein' to capture whatever they thought was interesting. The resulting audio, visual and written stories were presented online in a collaborative wiki environment accessible to all conference participants. Some stories were also shared in other formats, such as YouTube, FaceBook and via the conference blog.

This small scale experiment was part of the inspiration for a subgroup of participants to begin the Tell-A-Vision initiative, inviting people around the world to submit their 'vision

story' in the form of a 2-3 minute video piece portraying that person's vision of the future. See <http://www.onetruemedia.com> and <http://www.telavision.org> for examples and instructions about how to create your own Vision Story.

As Vision Stories are created, people throughout the world can easily use social bookmarking sites such as 'del.icio.us' to 'tag' each video with the keywords they think are relevant. Social bookmarks are just like your browser's bookmarks or 'favorites' except they live on the web, you can add comments and share them with others.

<http://commoncraft.com/bookmarking-plain-english>.

Think: millions of people are now able to theme thousands of videos, and they do it because they are motivated by their own interest. The more people tag my video 'inspiring,' 'systemic,' or 'Future-I-Want,' the more others who are searching those terms will find it.

I am now on the design team for the 2008 Girl Scout National Council and Convention, where we are considering a CrowdSourcing initiative in which hundreds or perhaps thousands of girls will become digital storytellers. Their job will be to reveal the essence of the Girl Scout Movement by following their interests and intuitions throughout the convention. They will use digital tools to identify essential stories to be processed quickly and shared online with girl scouts and guides around the world. The vision is to create an ongoing interactive Discovery process where the Girl Scout Movement shares stories, listens to and learns from the diverse constituencies among its four million members.

We are inviting the girls to lead the way in terms of identifying which technologies and web sites are most appropriate, valuable and interesting to them. We are considering blogs, wikis, photo sharing sites, instant messaging, smart phones and handheld cameras with video capability. We will invite girls to interact with published stories by leaving comments and tagging them so that themes and patterns can 'float to the top' and be visible to others. Social technologies that enable self-organization and high scalability will be essential for success. These social and digital technologies must be woven together into a seamless fabric that supports the overall initiative without getting in the way.

The potential of CrowdSourcing is vast. The challenge at present is weaving together various technologies with just enough structure to enable creative participation but not so much that it is inflexible or difficult to understand. As part of the 'digital native' generation, we expect many of these girls to be natural storytellers in this medium. As socially responsible young women who are dedicated to being of service to others, we also expect that they will help their peers and elders along the path to CrowdSourcing literacy. In fact, the teenage girls participating on the design team already came up with the idea of creating a lexicon to help people understand and adopt terminology that may be unfamiliar.

With technologies such as the iPhone, we have highly portable digital devices with capabilities similar to today's laptop and desktop computers. If you look at one of these devices while it is off, it is difficult to say what it is – a software-driven touch device is like a tabula rasa. It can be a musical instrument, a calendar, a note pad, a camera, the ear of a loved one or a thousand other things. It could be one of the best story-weaving devices since the campfire. This kind of device invites a new level of thinking about Appreciative Discovery. The question becomes 'How do we generate or invite the conditions necessary for whole-system Discovery to self-organize?'