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The Inside and Outside Worlds of an AI Practitioner

ABSTRACT

Being an AI practitioner is a curious mixture of being solid in our thinking while being flexible and aware that we are co-creating every moment. Our outside world can be that of a consultant, leader or manager while our inside one is where we develop ourselves and seek to be the best practitioner we can be. This issue highlights the way we evolve our practice and use AI with different models as well as handle personal challenges.

At a recent residential for practitioners who had been working with AI for some years, we talked about two key aspects of our practice: the outside world where we work as consultants, coaches, leaders, managers and change agents; and the internal world where we develop ourselves and seek to be the best practitioner we can be. ¹

Whether we work in or with an organisation, we need to be alert to new ways of thinking or new tools and techniques to help us be more effective in what we do. We also need to be stable and grounded to bring the best of ourselves to this work. Being an AI practitioner is a curious mixture of being solid in our thinking while being flexible and aware that we are co-creating every moment.

Whether working in an organisation or as a consultant, we recognised that our professional life is very busy. It can sometimes be a joy or a struggle to handle the many different aspects of developing our practice, such as:

- Seeing where and how we use new theories of managing change
- Looking for new tools and models
- Being aware of research that influences what we do
- Creating the right environment for each event and making it special for a group of people even when it seems anything but
- Experimenting with different forms of creating dialogue, connection and ways for people to co-create their futures

¹ Advanced AI Workshop on the Destiny phase: Sustainability – from project to way of life. Workshop leaders Jane Magruder Watkins and Anne Radford 17th – 19th August 2009 at Bore Place, Kent, UK



See more photos in Julie Barnes' photo essay on p. 39

We were also aware that our inside world raises complex questions about how we manage our own development as a practitioner such as:

- Where and how do we give ourselves time for our own development?
- What are the forms or processes that support and stretch us or help us go deeper into the significance of the work we do?
- How do we look after ourselves so that we are stable and grounded while exploring areas we find difficult?

The essence of being an AI practitioner

Steve speaks for the three of us when he describes the different spaces he inhabits as a consultant:

'The roles of consultant and interim executive mean that I inhabit many different spaces, sometimes several in a day or week. For instance, facilitator of an event for a team in a client organisation, fulfilling a formal organisational role as an interim, coaching with an executive of a client, and facilitating change via some consulting using Appreciative Inquiry.

Whatever the role, the opportunity and challenge to practice ethically and with integrity are ever present, as is the chance to introduce appreciative and strengths-based theories and the ethical practices they demand of us.

At one and the same time, like many consultants, I inhabit the public realm of the client organisation, in whatever capacity indicated above, and the more private space of work preparation, post-action reflection, self-development and learning.'

These aspects of the outside/inside experience inhabited by the AI practitioner are reflected in these articles.

Part 1: Personal challenges of organisational leadership

Joan McArthur-Blair uses AI extensively in her role as President of the Nova Scotia College, but her article focuses on her personal journey as a leader. She explains, passionately, how the trilogy of hope, despair and forgiveness shapes an appreciative leadership. Because she describes leadership as being 'an interface between the inner life and the outer world', it is appropriate that hers is the first article in this issue.

Bente Sloth and Carsten Hornstup in Denmark write about a major leap taken by Bente into the relative unknown, introducing us to her leadership of change via the appreciation of group dynamics and inter-group influence. The article describes the way AI provided her with the theory, practice and perhaps most critically, the confidence, to address colleagues with new ways of thinking and working as their organisation changed its structure. In this article, you will find a fitting way to understanding the outside/inside nature of appreciative practices.

Part 2: Combining AI with other models

David Shaked gradually realised that, whilst his professional training and practice had progressed well, they were deeply challenged by an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. This turned his world view through 180 degrees, from the deficit to the appreciative. Yet, with further experience and reflection, David was able to take his newly acquired appreciative view and reconsider the apparent

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deficit-focus of Lean and Six Sigma to look afresh at how they may have an added value if utilised appreciatively.

Geoff Allan joins together the almost 'ancient' personal and organisational practice of Action Learning Sets, with the relatively modern science and practice of AI, in a thought-provoking journey spanning personal experience, finding new learning and application methods. His piece will have many of us wondering why we haven't put AI and Learning Sets together in this way before.

For Richard Coe, the interplay of neuroscience and AI's social constructionist science, both brought to bear via the practice of AI, presents us with a fascinating and potentially controversial personal reflection. Richard brings together science and practice and suggests why AI can be successful, from a neuroscientific perspective.

East and West came together for José Otté when she recognised the common strands in the Aikido she had practiced for 20 years and her newly-acquired skills as an AI facilitator. It wasn't only that her outside and inside worlds had merged; they shared principles such as the positive, constructionist and poetic. Her article shows us the closeness of the two philosophies.

Part 3: Evolving our practice through reflection and working in new ways

For Sarah Lewis, a chance conversation created the opportunity to reflect anew on a major piece of work that seemed to have run its course, although there was yet more learning to be gained from the experience. Sarah reviews how the setting for a sequence of appreciative activities shaped those in such a way as to leave her puzzled at the time, yet reflecting later on how much had been achieved given the relatively unpropitious environment for the activities.

In her photo documentary Julie Barnes describes how she used AI to help a group of dementia sufferers and those responsible for their care discover what living well could, and should, mean. She considered that her learning was about the power of valuing diverse feelings, and as the appreciative facilitator, allowing them to be expressed. Her exemplar was the way one carer developed during the course of the AI process.

In her article, Jeanie Cockell describes how she formed an AI network in Nova Scotia which over three years has developed into an AI Circle that meets regularly to explore ways of using AI in both the outer and inner worlds of its members. Numerous quotes from Circle members and the description of the Circle process resonate with some of leading-edge Action Learning Set practice.

Roz Kay's piece talks of the mind and body, and how deepening our understanding of the part the body plays in helping or hindering us to achieve our goals is important to our success, in both our personal lives and practitioner roles. She also describes how the achievement of greater congruency of mind and body, allied to the positive framing of issues by AI, can transform personal and practice lives.

Ada Jo Mann already had a life-time of experience in the international development when she became involved with AI during its formative years; the 4Ds name was conjured up by her during a training session led by David Cooperrider. As a good trainer she believed in making the complex simple.

The LEAD model allows people as diverse as African villagers and corporate leaders to understand and use AI.

So she recently developed the LEAD model, something that allows people as diverse as African villagers and corporate leaders to understand and use AI very quickly.

As we look again at the questions we raised about a practitioner's development at the beginning of the Introduction, we see many ways in which the authors are supporting and stretching themselves as practitioners. These include:

- Being honest with themselves: This was expressed very powerfully by Joan McArthur-Blair as 'being willing to go into a place of deeper understanding.' For Bente Sloth it was recognising that she needed to be a different kind of leader for a changing situation. Roz Kay discovered it was about exploring the body and its part in her development as an authentic practitioner; and for Sarah Lewis it was about exploring work that had already been completed but still revealed further meaning for her during reflection with a colleague.
- Re-assessing existing fields from an appreciative perspective: It took courage for David Shaked to look again at two models he knew well, Lean and Six Sigma, and look at them with an appreciative eye. Richard Coe is aware that developments in neuroscience are affecting his interaction with clients and is curious about how this will develop. Jeanie Cockell shows us how beneficial it can be for groups of practitioners to get together to learn about existing models using an appreciative eye as well as learn about ourselves.
- Experiencing the success in combining fields: Geoff Allan's journey led him to combine Action Learning Sets and AI with powerful results; the shared principles of AI and Aikido brought together the inside and outside worlds for José Otté. Ada Jo Mann's many years of experience with many approaches and models has enabled her to make the complex simple. This has led to developing the LEAD model.
- Feeling the power of a passion or vocation: Julie Barnes' photo essay shows her commitment to the field of dementia, as well as the impact it has on people with dementia. She and the other authors showed the passion for their work through their stories. Their commitment to be the best they could be meant they drew new meaning from their current work, as well as exploring new areas.

When we started working on this issue, we had no idea of the richness of the articles that would emerge. We think they show us all the developing power of AI and the continued need for practitioners the world over to stay alive to the many and varied learning opportunities provided by the outside and inside dimensions of our practice.

Geoff Allan, Steve Loraine and Anne Radford

Guest editors, February 2010

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

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IAPG Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information



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Purpose of AI Practitioner

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