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# AI Practitioner



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## Appreciative Inquiry and Communities of Practice

Mille Duvander  
Kaj Voetmann  
Sue James



## Inside this issue

### Welcome to May 2013 issue of AI Practitioner

Anne Radford, Editor in Chief



This May 2013 issue, *Appreciative Inquiry and Communities of Practice*, looks at communities of practice (COP), working with complex systems and the challenges of doing research within your own organization.

Editors Mille Duvander, Kaj Voetmann and Sue James describe CoPs through wonderful and unexpected stories about bridges that grow from trees, human castles and a fable about goats and trolls,

In the Feature Choice case study, Anastasia Bukashe and Rod Charlton describe their work with the Anglican Diocese of Johannesburg on the leadership transition to a new bishop through a consultation process by engaging 75 parishes and

45,000 members. Anastasia and Rod share their reflections and key components as they worked with this complex system.

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# Appreciative Inquiry and Communities of Practice

## ABSTRACT

The inquiry we undertake in this issue is to look for the 'common unities' that bring us together and make it possible for us to build social worlds together. Social worlds also hold the shared resources and infrastructures that make it possible for us to do and build things that make our dreams come true. We asked for contributions that could help us illustrate how communities of practice around the world have worked to build common unities and the shared resources and infrastructures that promote their own practice.

Heroes in fairy tales stand on the shoulders of natural and supernatural helpers who have inspired and helped them be able to do what they do. Our heroes, the practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry and strengths-based approaches, some of whom have written contributions for this issue of AI Practitioner, are also practising on the shoulders of other people and on the common resources built by their helpers.

## Human castles

We introduce these contributions with a metaphor we found after reading the stories. The metaphor is "human castles" as formed by the *Castellers de Barcelona*.

At the top of the castle, we see the young stars who draw our attention. Under them, we have all the people who make it possible for the stars to show their skills and amaze us with their performance.

This snapshot of a human castle does not show why or how they build their castles. The snapshot only shows a single moment in time of the whole that makes it possible for the *castellers* to build human castles. The whole castle is built of individuals; yet none of them could do this on their own. All of them depend on the others.

We wanted to see the whole, and how it came to look as it does at that in that moment of time. We started looking for good maps and models that could make us better understand the whole.

## "Nothing is as practical as a good theory"

Inspired by this quote from Kurt Lewin (Schein, 1995), one of the pioneers in Action Research, we found two pieces of good theory we would like to make even more practical.

Like the head, communities of practice are supported by a 'backbone'.



The first piece is called communities of practice, which are at the top of the human castle. Like a head on a human body, communities of practice are supported by a “backbone” made up of individual parts, for example individuals and organizations.

The second piece of theory is called backbone organizations. The energy that feeds human castles is public engagement in practice.

The community needs to pass on the applied knowledge of the practice

### Our practical theory

*Communities of Practice* (Wenger, 1998) are the places where we learn the stories that give meaning to our practices, our activities and our identities, as well as the necessary skills that make it possible for us to live and/or work successfully within that community. Most of us belong to several communities of practice: we are born into our families; girls also belong to female communities of practice, boys to male communities of practice. Most communities of practice have rituals connected to passing from child to adult to elder. In professional communities of practice we move between levels of skill as well: apprentices become journeyman, who may become adept. Some become masters. The community needs to pass on the applied knowledge of the practice to the next generation. The individual will go through to the next level if he or she meets the requirements for passing.

Communities of practice are built on *Backbone Organizations* (Turner et al, 2012), which are often invisible to the communities of practice until they begin to look for them. The strength of these backbone organizations depends to a large degree on the amount of public engagement that exists in the local, regional, national and global societies.

Backbone organizations pursue a set of activities that support and facilitate the life of communities of practice. Seen over the lifecycle of an initiative, backbone organizations provide services such as:

1. Guidance for identity, vision and strategy processes
2. Support for aligned activities with shared resources and infrastructures
3. Establishment of shared measurement practices
4. Campaigns to build public engagement
5. Efforts to spread and develop policies that promote the purpose and the practices
6. Efforts to mobilize funding

Most new communities of practice, such as the intentional communities of practice formed by groups of professionals or members of a local community, do not have the experience and resources needed to do all of these things themselves. The experience and resources usually come from many different individuals, groups and organizations in different local communities with local challenges and circumstances. Backbone organizations provide these services so tools, techniques and methods can be shared across the communities of practice. Otherwise local practitioners will end up with a well-known problem: without the inspiration from other communities of practice, it can be hard to utilize the full local potential.

#### Key conditions for the success of initiatives

Collective Impact: Five Key Conditions for Shared Success

Source: Turner et al 2012

Common Agenda	All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions
Shared Measurement	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action
Continuous Communication	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies



Learning  
Points  Potentials  
Worth noticing

In the conclusion to this issue of *AI Practitioner*, we highlight what has been accomplished so far and the potential for new directions for our practices.

### The editors' learning points

We added "learning points" to several of the contributions to highlight the findings we discovered in each story that were the most important for us. We hope they will help make it easier for you, as practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry and strengths-based approaches, to create, maintain and transform the communities of practice and backbone organizations needed to make your dreams come true.

This box illustrates the learning points in the contributions and also guides the concluding piece in this issue of *AI Practitioner*.

### The contributions

"We have a Dream" is the article that we, as co-editors and companion "explorers" for this issue, have written. This is a "short charter for all practices based on Appreciative Inquiry and strength-based approaches." We have taken the liberty of making a provocative and generative proposition on the common agenda for practitioners.

"Stories from the Constellation" offers a collection of stories of the ways in which strength-based approaches have been applied to build better support for people and communities infected by HIV/AIDS. The Constellation has many local communities of practice which have built their own backbone organization, as well as connecting to other backbone organizations around the world. The public engagement is strong and widespread.

"Begeistring" is a personal story about how a network of practitioners of AI and strength-based approaches in Europe started gathering in an "open space" to connect, combine and co-create.

"Getting Across the Bridge" tells the story of a group in Sweden which created an AI forum within a quality management department in a university setting, all vividly illustrated by the fairytale about three goats and a troll. When dedicated practitioners decide to add new approaches to an existing practice they can face the challenge of persuading the people in power. This article shows how you can face this challenge in an appreciative way and get the support of people who hold the power in universities. Universities are important backbone organizations almost everywhere yet can have trouble catching up with the pace of innovation that runs through our global society. This article shows how practitioners can join forces with universities and handle that challenge with mutual respect.

"Living Bridges Planet" shares the story of how a small group of people interested in using AI and strength-based approaches to share knowledge and develop ideas and practices around social entrepreneurship and building social capital. It draws on the wonderful metaphor of the "living bridges" of Meghalaya in India. In this article there are several backbone organizations. Facebook provided the platform that made it possible for people to find each other, connect, develop ideas and meet in real life. The Hub provided the physical space. AI Community Denmark designed and facilitated the meeting.



Read more about applying communities of practice to support those dealing with HIV/AIDS on page 25

The Three Billy Goats Gruff are used as a metaphor for getting a new project started within a university. To read more, go to page 41



Finally, “People’s University” explores the power of using maps and models, based on experience, as a useful approach for all of us as AI practitioners and members of communities of practices to make explicit the stories, knowledge, wisdom, challenges and outcomes of our work with Appreciative Inquiry.

In our journey together, as editors, we have been awed and inspired by the stories that are shared. We have had the deeply rewarding and enriching opportunity to connect with one another and explore our own common unities as AI practitioners. In this process, we discovered a few possible answers to some of the questions we had been considering ourselves. But we also discovered more questions – perhaps even greater or more significant ones – that will challenge us as we move forward in our individual and collective quests to create communities of practice around AI.

We hope this collection of articles will now invite you to step into the same space and journey with us and the other contributors as we all continue to explore what it means to share common unities as AI practitioners, and co-create local as well as global communities of practice.

**Mille Duvander, Kaj Voetmann and Sue James**  
**May, 2013**

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# About the August 2013 Issue

## Appreciative Inquiry in Asia

How does being in East Asia shape the way AI is perceived, harnessed and deployed?

What lessons do these experiences offer in terms of shaping the development of positive societies, organisations and the awareness of appreciative practices?

Asia is a fascinating continent undergoing dramatic transformation. The I (India) and the C (China) of the BRIC economies are located in Asia. Hot on the heels of the famous Tiger economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea; are the emerging markets of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. Yet the diversity of peoples, cultures and historical experiences unify to provide a unique context to different approaches to societal and organisational transformation and change.

The August 2013 issue of AI Practitioner explores the possibility of generating answers to questions like:

- What are the experiences of Asian practitioners of Appreciative Inquiry and other positive change methods?
- How does being in East Asia shape the way AI is perceived, harnessed and deployed?
- What lessons do these experiences offer in terms of shaping the development of positive societies, organisations and the awareness of appreciative practices?

This issue will include articles from China, Singapore, Malaysia, India and Taiwan on the ways Appreciative Inquiry is being used in NGOs and government departments, business and education; for coaching individuals as well as groups, large and small.

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## Purpose of AI Practitioner

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