AI Practitioner

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Business, Schools and Communities as Agents of World Benefit: Flourishing in Challenging Times

Towards a Flourishing World: Interacting with People as the Agents of World Benefit

Kurt Lewin spent the second half of his career in the USA, examining the question: Can we create knowledge about the productive forces in groups and societies? This question has become crucial again. It is time to re-create knowledge about the productive forces in societies and groups.

In the original article on Appreciative Inquiry, which grew out of Cooperrider's Ph.D. dissertation, David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva (1987) paid tribute to Kurt Lewin:

Lewin's character was marked by a spirit of inquiry that burned incessantly and affected all who came in contact with him, especially his students. The intensity of his presence was further fueled by the belief that inquiry itself could be used to construct a more democratic and dignified future. At least, this was his hope and dream, for Lewin had not forgotten his experience as a refugee from fascism in the late 1930s ... It was this spirit – a relentless curiosity coupled with a conviction of the need for knowledge-guided societal development – that marked Lewin's creative impact on both his students and the field.

'If you truly want to understand something, then try to change it.'
Kurt Lewin

When I studied social psychology in Amsterdam in the middle 1990s and became aware of the importance of Kurt Lewin's work, this struck a chord that made my heart sing. This is why Cooperrider's and Srivastva's hommage to the German psychologist as a starting point for AI is so crucial to me. Kurt Lewin spent the second half of his career in the USA, examining a fundamental question: We know so much about the destructive forces in groups, can we now create knowledge about the productive forces in groups and societies?

His research was the foundation for group dynamics and action-research. For Lewin and his students, action and research were tightly coupled because, he said, "There's nothing as practical as a good theory" and "If you truly want to understand something, then try to change it". Changing and understanding go hand in hand.

Lewin's question "How can we understand more of the productive forces in groups and in society?" seems to have become crucial again. With the strong emotions on all sides surrounding Brexit, the election of Trump, the way Putin, Erdogan, Orban, Kaczynski and others talk and behave, it looks and sounds very familiar to people living in central Europe, a throw-back to the 1930s. It is indeed time to re-create knowledge about the productive forces in societies and groups.

Groups and societies

Groups consist of people interacting with each other; societies of people and groups interacting with each other. By far the majority have the best of intentions, but the only thing that matters is the effect of their (lack of) collaboration. When we live in challenging times, we have the tendency to look for easy explanations and easy solutions. "It all started when… you…when they… did so and so." By simplifying our world in these cause-and-effect sequences, we tend to forget what our own contributions to events have been; we tend to ignore interactions between people that don't "start" somewhere. Interactions are feedback loops going back-and-forth between people. Studying those feedback loops, let alone influencing them, is a complex process.

I strongly believe that individuals can change the world, for the better or for the worse. But they can never do this alone. One of my teachers in AI, Maureen McKenna, stated this beautifully, quoting Margaret Mead: "Yes, any one of us can change the world. One conversation at the time." It is in our conversations, in our interactions with other people, that we have the power to influence things.

'Any one of us can change the world. One conversation at the time.'
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The philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry begins with a respect for all voices. In a recent and timely TED talk, entitled "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone", His Holiness Pope Francis addressed exactly this issue: in

To read David Cooperrider's thoughts on fresh eyes and fresh ideas, go to "Business as An Agent of World Benefit: Why Do Good Things Happen to Good Companies?" on page 67

To read about Mac and Marcia Odell's experiences in sharing the WORTH project and APA goals in Nepal and Africa, go to "Appreciative Planning and Action in Nepal and Liberia" on page 76

To read more about the Imagine Chicago project and how it spread, go to "An Inspired Future" on page 46

the video, he says "Let us help each other, all together, to remember that the 'other' is not a statistic, or a number. We all need each other."[1]

Agents of world benefit

The topic of this issue of *AI Practitioner* is so important at this moment in time: Businesses, Schools and Communities as Agents of World Benefit. Large companies, educational systems, communites, are more-or-less coordinated assemblages of conversations. And when a large collection of interactions coincides, such as a multinational company embracing a purpose like climate change to create a flourishing world, it becomes easier to coordinate the interlocked behaviours within a group or an organization.

A mixture of old and new

This issue of *AI Practitioner* is a much bigger than we are used to: the articles are a mixture of "old" and "new". In June, 2017, Case Western Reserve University hosts a conference in Cleveland on "Discovering Flourishing Enterprise: Businesses as an Agent of World Benefit". This issue is special, not only for our subscribers but also for the participants of the conference. David Cooperrider and Ron Fry have written longer, informative and stimulating articles about the topic of the conference. Wick van der Vaart has interviewed Léon Wijnands, Global Head Sustainability of ING. Marge Schiller and Lindsey Godwin have written about the potential of intergenerational learning as a possibility the world can embrace and benefit from.

Another idea was to select some articles we have published before, articles that talked about communities, schools and businesses that have made a difference. We contacted the authors and asked them whether they could write a reflection about their earlier articles, by asking them the following questions:

- What has happened since, what were the long-term effects of the project;

- What did you learn from it, as an AI facilitator and how did you take this knowledge forward?

- And how can this knowledge help us in these challenging times?

Amanda Trosten-Bloom, Tobias Schueth, Bliss Browne, Ilene Wasserman, Malcolm and Marcia Odell, Ron Fry, Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair responded to our call and their reflections are a pleasure to read.

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1 You can hear the talk in full at https://www.ted.com/talks/pope_francis_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone?utm_source=tedcomshare&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=tedspread.

I would especially like to thank Marge Schiller and Lindsey Godwin who not only submitted their article about the importance of intergenerational learning, but who also enticed Chris Laszlo and his co-authors into writing a splendid Feature Choice article about the narratives in modern business schools.

As well, we have our regular features: Nourish to Flourish, with practitioners' stories complied by Keith Storace; Research Review and Notes, by Neelima Paranjay, about conducting research within your own organization; and the Resources column by Hardik Shah and Roopa Nandi.

This issue wouldn't have been possible without Shelagh Aitken who had to be very patient this time. She really helped us to come up with a big and beautiful *AI Practitioner*, a worthwhile and engaging summer read.

Enjoy!

Wick van der Vaart and David C. Cooperrider
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