

Designing Appreciative Inquiry as Generative Process of Organizational Change: Stretching the Practice of this Dialogic Approach

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Introduction

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) originally introduced appreciative inquiry as a form of action research that embraces generativity as the guiding value in studying and influencing the dynamics of social and organizational life. With their appreciative approach, they responded to the appeal of Gergen to take on the role of scholarly activists and develop knowledge with “generative capacity” (1978). Such knowledge may act as a catalyst for social and organizational transformation through its ability to challenge the status quo, to create a sense of possibility and to thereby open up new repertoires for thought and action.

By accepting Gergen’s invitation for generative theorizing, appreciative inquiry embraces the underlying constructionist premise that, since it is our own creation, nothing in our social reality needs to be taken for granted. We can use the constitutive power of language to create new meanings and change our world. With this focus on meaning-making, appreciative inquiry belongs to the new, “dialogic” approaches to organizational development (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Grant, 2008). These approaches use a discursive lens to look at human systems as networks of conversations and to develop change interventions that influence the texts, stories and images that make certain activities feasible and legitimate.

Now, 25 years after its introduction, appreciative inquiry has developed into a globally utilized change methodology that involves the collaborative and “systematic discovery of everything that gives ‘life’ to a living system when it is most alive, effective and flourishing, and most capable in economic, ecological, and human terms” (Cooperrider, 2010, p. xiii). Appreciative inquiry is best documented as a planned approach to change in which large group summit meetings play a central role (Bushe, 2011). In this approach participants, who ideally represent a whole system, are facilitated through dialogue that follow the so-called 4-D cycle of discovery, dream, design and destiny.

Because of its apparent simplicity and luring strength-based stance, appreciative inquiry can be misunderstood as an attractive and easy to emulate technique (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 196). Such misunderstanding may cause slippage from thoughtful inquiry into a managerial tool

to create motivational experiences at work rather than to engage with complex issues. Such slippage may ultimately turn the appreciative approach into another disappointing management fad. It is clear to us that in order to bring out its generative potential, appreciative inquiry asks for a subtle and fine-tuned approach. The prolific use of appreciative inquiry during the last decades provides us with rich experiential material for timely reflection, critique and renewal. We can tell stories of its success, of how it informs and energizes shared action towards aspired future states whilst creating a sense of efficacy and relatedness. There is also ample space for a better understanding of what makes it work, for a refinement in its practice and underlying theory and for an awareness of superficial use or abuse.

We know that discovery interviews and dream conversations create enthusiasm, connection and commitment among those who participate. How can they hold on to this momentum to co-create change that becomes embedded in organizational practice? Barrett (2009, p. 7), notices the need to “document and theorize the learning that continues after the initial excitement of the discovery and dream phases.” Where most appreciative inquiry initiatives will adhere to the sequence of the 4-D cycle, there are many adaptations into different forms of engagement that range from individual coaching, to corporate strategic planning, to community building (Ludema & Fry, 2008, p. 284). Where these manifold applications may show the generative strength of the approach, they also raise questions around robustness and adherence to underlying principles. How to decide what form of engagement will be most helpful in a certain change context at a certain time? Bushe (2011, p. 11) states that we need to better understand the moderators and contingencies that influence appreciative inquiry outcomes.

In this paper we respond to the invitation of Barrett (2009) and Bushe (2011) to further develop appreciative inquiry as a change process with the sophistication to impact not only the broad organizational aspirations, but also the subtleties of habitual daily practice. In what follows, we explore the question of how to design appreciative inquiry processes to fit the evolving characteristics of organizations in a way that safeguard their generativity. In this exploration we adopt Gergen’s definition of generative processes as “those in which new and enriching potentials are opened through the flow of interchange” (2009, p. 47).

We start with the theoretical base that informs the guiding principles of appreciative inquiry. We then describe the repertoire of possibilities of design choices and situational characteristics. We ground this description in examples from our own facilitation experience and in complementary literatures. In line with Head’s (2005) earlier contribution to develop a contingency approach to appreciative inquiry, we proceed by discussing how design possibilities may be matched with situational characteristics. We address how generativity may be affirmed in varied and contrasting AI processes. We also discuss what may be required from those of us

who facilitate and study them. We believe that this situated approach creates a promising space for designing change processes that help create the generative capacity among participants to inquire into topics that matter to them in transformative ways.

Principles that Underlie Appreciative Inquiry Theory and Practice

Appreciative inquiry is a way of knowing that takes generativity as its guiding value. In contrast to what they saw as the problem-solving focus of conventional action research, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) envisioned an affirmative form of knowledge creation as a pathway to social innovation (ibid, p. 159). Appreciative inquiry intends to extend visions of possibility through valuing that which gives life to a human system and by using the power of our imaginative mind. The key assumption is that through appreciation and imagination we can generate knowledge with creative, transformative significance to society (ibid, p. 160). The “positive principle” of appreciative inquiry (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 48), informs the use of an appreciative eye through which we explore life-generating experiences. Such exploration creates the positive affect (like hope, joy, and caring) and necessary momentum to enable change. Appreciative inquiry stimulates collective imaginative capacity because of its “anticipatory principle” (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 46), which is the assumption that we act and change towards aspired future images. Combining both underlying principles in today’s appreciative inquiry practice, generativity is commonly understood to occur when original ideas arise that create a sense of compelling possibility and energize those who are involved to take joint novel action (Bright et al., 2012; Bushe, 2007).

Conceptualized as a second-generation form of action research (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2012), appreciative inquiry is meant to be an inquiring approach to development and change. According to Cooperrider and Avital (2004, p. xii), the key to understanding appreciative inquiry lies in an emphasis on the second word in the inseparable pair. They state that “while many are intrigued with the appreciative inquiry positive bias – toward the good, the better, the exceptional, and the possible – it is the power of inquiry we must learn more about and underscore.” Beyond the diagnosis of current realities, the premise of appreciative studies is that through inquiry we construct anew. The appreciative approach is based on the assumption that inquiry is already an intervention. It’s “principle of simultaneity” (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 46) presumes that by focusing attention through the questions we ask, we illuminate and thereby create, the realities we can see and find.

Appreciative inquiry’s “constructionist principle” with the guiding notion that “words create worlds” (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 42), informs a practical and theoretical focus on metaphor (Barrett & Cooperrider, 1990), imagery (Cooperrider, 1990) and a narrative, poetic mode of

knowing (Ludema, 2002; Zandee, 2008). This discursive focus is based on the idea that change possibility arises from new forms of intelligibility and that new languages of understanding broaden the range of possible actions (Gergen, 1994, p. 60). Its constructionist grounding makes appreciative inquiry a change process in which the relational aspect is a key ingredient (Gergen et al., 2004, p. 4). We need to talk to figure things out and through how we engage we shape our future.

Appreciative inquiry takes an activist stance by inviting, encouraging and requiring that “students of social life rigorously exercise their theoretical imagination in the service of their vision of the good” (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 140). Just like other language, inquiry outcomes and theoretical texts can have transformative capacity by impacting the content and quality of conversation. What to study, how to study and how to share findings are responsible choices of consequence. The “poetic principle” of appreciative inquiry (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 44) states that “organizations are open-ended, evolving networks of possibilities open to an endless variety of perspectives” in which we can virtually find and study any possible topic. But since what we pay attention to will grow and expand, our topic choice is a decisive act. Through our inquiry we can nurture or hamper generative processes of relating and change.

Design Choices: Translating AI Principles into Application Possibilities

The guiding principles of appreciative inquiry give insight in the underlying change dynamics, whilst leaving ample space for translation into practice. Engeström (1994) emphasizes how know-how can be captured in contrasting “orientation bases”: where systemic holistic principles help understand “why things work,” algorithmic designs and protocols help figure out what actions to take. He suggests that a limited number of principles can invariably be translated into a whole range of design possibilities. We took guidance from his ideas and explored the array of appreciative inquiry applications in literature and practice. In what follows we describe three basic design choices that may stretch current appreciative inquiry practice, yet still seem truthful to its underlying philosophy. These design choices relate to how life-centric focus, spirit of inquiry and relational engagement are interpreted and actuated.

What gives life?

Appreciative inquiry strives to create change by illuminating and building on the life-giving qualities and dynamics of an organization or other human system. However, the understanding of this life-centric characteristic remains open for interpretation. In classic appreciative inquiry applications “life-giving” is translated into a dedicated attention to a system’s so-called “positive core” of achievements, high point moments, values, traditions and competencies. The belief is that a sharing of positive experiences that highlight existing strengths will create the

positive affect that energizes positive change. Because of this focus on positivity, appreciative inquiry was embraced by the field of positive organizational scholarship which now provides part of its theoretical grounding (Cameron et al., 2003; Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Especially Fredrickson's (2003) theory of positive emotions is widely used to legitimize the assumed connection between positive image and action. This interpretation of a life-centric focus has evoked others to comment that what is positive is not necessarily generative (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Fineman, 2006; Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Those who critique, argue that by exclusively favoring positive narratives the change opportunity is missed that lies in an exploration of negative experiences. This raises the question whether it can be life-centric and strength building to focus our attention on what is hard, on what we fear, possibly even on our cynicism. If so, can such a focus be an alternative design choice that still honors appreciative inquiry principles?

A group of nurses in an academic hospital is fed up with doctors who regularly do not show up at consultation hours for breast cancer patients. This has been happening for years and the nurses repeatedly deal with upset patients. The nurses ask us to come and talk with them about their frustration with this issue. In our meeting they insist that 1) this should not happen, 2) that the doctors are at fault, 3) that there should be a procedure to deal with this, and 4) that if the procedure does not work, management should call the doctors to order. Together we explore how well these procedural and hierarchical actions have worked in the past. It turns out that in the last four years they have never been effective. We discover that the doctors' persistent behavior, however dysfunctional, is anything but irrational. For instance, resident surgeons are often called away at the last minute for surgery by their own bosses and they feel it harms their career if they do not respond. We also find that procedural fixes have led to more bureaucracy rather than increased attendance. During this conversation the nurses' frustration is palpable. Only after they inquire into this "negative" experience with gritting teeth for an hour and a half, are they willing to explore alternative ways to deal with the situation. One nurse states: "we have nothing to lose at this point." We raise the question whether they have done anything during the last years that has made a difference, however slight or temporary. The nurses share that when they speak directly to "John" or "Steve" and ask them to do them a favor, it does change things for the better. For a month. After which they have to do it again, though it does get easier each time. What has not worked was any department-wide system to arrange attendance of all doctors in one stroke, but what has worked was direct contact through which the nurses keep their colleagues on their toes. Some nurses find this a tough conclusion: "I am not his mother, this should not be my job!" We ask "why not, if it works like a charm, takes little effort and helps the cancer patients?" Working through their emotions leads the nurses to conclude that such actions on their part are something they should appreciate rather than shun.

They decide to reclaim it as part of their work and to expand on it over the next months. From now on they will regard themselves as leaders in patient relations.

This case implies how a focus on what is tough may be part of a generative process. Being appreciative then implies “to honor what is” (Johnson, 2012; Pratt, 2002) and seek generativity wherever it may be found. This is pertinent as dealing with challenging issues may raise uncertainties about abilities, support and risk of failure. It may involve unfamiliar repertoires, unpredictable processes and arouse opposition (Brown & Starkey, 2000). As a result people may be hesitant to embark on such journeys. This is well recognized in the psychodynamic literature where French (2001) suggests that successful change depends on a combination of “positive capabilities” needed to deal constructively with the issue’s content and “negative capabilities” needed to deal with the associated emotions. Careful facilitation and the collaborative relationship with others can allow for the exploration of censored thoughts and feelings. It creates a “holding space” where they can be appreciated, understood and handled (Hirschhorn, 1988). By exploring this “shadow” of the censored new possibilities can emerge, because it is also the place where repressed dreams and capabilities may hide (Fitzgerald et al., 2010).

We propose to interpret life-giving as the creation of a sense of efficacy, thus overcoming the positive/negative polarity of what we may focus on in appreciative inquiry. This allows for appreciable experiences that include the problematic and painful aspects of organizational life next to our achievements and peak experiences. We propose that in designing specific AI processes we should gauge the situation and choose which focus will be most generative.

How do we inquire?

With their introduction of appreciative inquiry, Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) wanted to re-awaken the “spirit of inquiry” which they saw as pivotal for research that wishes to be of vital significance to society. Such spirit allows us to respond with a sense of “awe, curiosity, veneration, surprise, delight, amazement and wonder” to the mystery and miracle of life (Cooperrider, 1996, p. 5). It grounds appreciative inquiry in the field of aesthetic discourse which invites a more intuitive and imaginative way of knowing (Strati, 1999). Conventional approaches to appreciative inquiry which use the discovery of strengths to awaken the collective imagination of aspired futures, seem to spend less time on creating an understanding of the more subtle dynamics of human systems. Its constructionist, dialogic stance may nurture a hesitancy to develop applications that seem more diagnostic in character. However, when issues are complex or persistent, cherished ideas and habitual actions might stand in the way of discerning what enables real innovation. In such cases a sense of wonder might not suffice to show and shift underlying change dynamics. This raises the question whether it can serve

generativity to insist on research rigor in appreciative inquiry processes. Can it be appreciative to “force” participants to become action researchers under expert guidance?

We teach in a Dutch postgraduate program geared toward experienced change agents. Its point of departure is that practitioners with 15-30 experience have a lot of professionalism, but are often unable to put into words what they do, let alone to say why it works. A good example is a student who has great success dealing with organizations full of toxic emotions. Her implicit know-how can potentially be of great value to others. However, the concepts she uses to explain her work come from the arena of project management. None of these shed much light on the magic of her work. Her knowledge is tacit and that hinders both her development and her ability to contribute to the profession. The main thrust of the program is that she and her fellow students research their own practices and elucidate their implicit “change methodologies.” This endeavor is new territory for the students. Practitioners learn all the time, but this does not mean they create knowledge for others. Their learning is often too piecemeal and implicit. They pick things up on the job. Driving away from the client, they may ponder what worked and what didn’t, or they may discuss their dilemmas with a colleague. Thus, they learn predominantly through reflection (in the car by themselves) and interaction (talking with a colleague). Both give new insights but rarely lead to a cohesive story. It more often adds to a fuzzy cloud of loosely coupled notions which are only accessible for them. To conceptualize their experience, research rigor seems required. So we guide them in acquiring rich qualitative data from their past work and new experiments. We ask them to analyze the data from multiple viewpoints in collaboration with colleagues and clients, to delve into the relevant literature for analytical frames and to conceptualize their findings in ways that do justice to the material. We ask them to write up their findings, present it to their peers for scrutiny and seek platforms to influence their field. Most of them are surprised by both the content and significance of their findings. They become more visible contributors to the community of practice and invariably take on more challenging issues in their work. They may make research part of their ongoing professional life and some even receive publication awards.

The case suggests it may be generative and empowering for practitioners to take on the role of action researcher and engage in rigorous collaborative inquiry. Even though, as Eden and Huxham (1996) underline, it takes time to understand the methodological issues involved in action research and that it will always remain an imprecise, uncertain and unstable activity. It is a craft that many participants will not sufficiently master to allow for high quality research. On top of this, rigorous inquiry into complex issues is bound to be not only frame breaking for an organization but also for the action researchers: they learn to look at themselves, their practice and their context with new eyes (Vermaak, 2011). We suggest that exactly these challenges

may make the effort so generative. Such inquiry allows for knowledge creation and change actualization through the iterative cycles of action and reflection. This focus on workability also encourages improvisation and experimentation. Change outcomes are not created quickly, but incrementally in small wins that can be built upon to transform large systems over time (Weick & Westley, 1996). The knowledge that is created is firmly grounded in practice and may capture intricacies that elude more distanced researchers. A growing number of examples in education, health care and other fields use appreciative inquiry as a research methodology. These less conventional applications show that life-generating essentials can be unearthed and that innovative, generative knowledge can be created through empirical work that takes a constructionist, reflexive stance (Schall, et al., 2004).

We propose that the spirit of inquiry may be served as much by a sense of rigor as a sense of wonder. In the process of affecting change, appreciative inquiry may choose to focus on researching hidden dynamics in everyday practice as a design option that is equally powerful as a focus on liberating potentials through discovery and imagination.

Who do we engage?

The constructionist principle of appreciative inquiry makes “relational engagement” a pivotal quality. Because the relationship is seen as the locus of knowledge creation (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 195), inclusive conversation and collaboration are key. This is why appreciative inquiry literature tends to emphasize large group summit meetings in which widespread participation is encouraged. The idea is that with “the whole system” in the room, the diversity in stakeholder perspectives will introduce the novelty in conversation that is conducive for change. Through boundary crossing inquiry, innovative ideas may emerge whilst participants develop mutual understanding and a quality of relatedness that creates commitment for shared future oriented action. Because large group, cross boundary participation introduces a sense of wholeness and possibility, it lends itself well for inquiry into the qualities, values and purpose of an organization. But rather than in terms of whole organizations, human systems can also be defined as whole transformation processes (Checkland, 2000; Engeström, 2001). When such systems are delineated around concrete operations, they lend themselves well to inquiry into the complexities and potentials of daily practice as a way to transform them. Where both types of systems have in common that they include diversity in viewpoints and allow for dialogic engagement, they differ markedly in terms of scale. Instead of inquiring with one big organizational system in the room, inquiry may take place in many parallel, but smaller operational systems. Where the first tends to include any stakeholders with an interest in the change topic, the second excludes people who are not “hands on” involved. This raises the question whether it can be as generative to zoom in on the transformational potentials of daily practice by engaging only those directly involved, as it is

with large group intervention methods like a summit meeting. Can such different forms of engagement still be in step with appreciative inquiry principles?

We facilitated a two-year OD process at the Dutch embassy in South Africa when it was still engaged in dispensing foreign aid to help develop the country. The Ministry of Foreign affairs professed a need for equal partnership in development cooperation between donors and recipients. This is easier said than done. It requires dealing with cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, power differences and historical sensitivities caused by previous colonial ties. These complications come to life in day-to-day interactions between Embassy professionals and their external counterparts. There is no protocol or best practice that suffices here. Respect is not a formula. Some senior Dutch officials brought the issue to our attention and asked us to think it through with them. Looking around the table we saw three white faces. The first thing we suggested was to not discuss this issue around this table in this composition, but to inquire into the issue in a mixed group of Dutch and South African staff whilst working on concrete development programs. This was met with some apprehension. All the complications, challenges and tensions they experienced with external counterparts were also felt inside the embassy between local and expatriate staff. We suggested that the only believable way to create partnerships beyond the embassy's walls, was to learn to develop them in the internal microcosm as well. So, a change process was designed for the mixed group that was collectively responsible for successfully pulling off development cooperation. Embassy staff who worked in other fields were purposely excluded. Already during the first day of working together, tensions arose that had everything to do with strained relationships between expat and local staff. We legitimized dealing with these tensions as part of the work and asked them to commit themselves to inquire into concrete collaborative moments in their daily operations, rather than to restate foregone conclusions and generalized accusations. This led quite quickly to increased insight, appreciation and ability to deal with differences on the job, which then spilled over in their work with external counterparts enhancing the effectiveness of their development programs.

The case suggests that confrontation with the richness of actual practice can be quite powerful, especially if the inquirers are in a position to experiment with what they discover in real time. Doing such inquiry with people whose direct contributions are needed to deal with a concrete issue, creates a focus on “activity systems” that generally cut across departmental barriers or even organizational walls (Engeström, 2001). This focus diminishes coordination needs, management meetings and turf wars. Working within such systems allows for leadership to become more readily distributed, shared and constructed as a collective process (Hosking, 2002). It also enables the constructive dealing with frictions, because this is easier done on a

small scale and in relation to concrete tasks (Dreu, 2006). The success of small scale inquiries can spread contagiously to other teams that may be inspired to start their own generative process (Strang & Soule, 1998). From this perspective, inquiry may well be most powerful when it engages the smallest possible work system. Like for example, in a hospital when patients with their immediate doctors, nurses and family inquire into the qualities and dynamics of their healing processes.

We propose that different types of engagement are possible as design choices that equally honor the appreciative inquiry principles of collaboration and multi stakeholder inclusion. Though appreciative inquiry summits are perhaps best documented, the appreciative approach is open to a variety of forms of engagement that allow it to be tailored to specific topics and situations.

Design Indicators: Confronting AI Possibilities with Situational Characteristics

If we embrace the notion that through our interactions we construct the social reality in which we function, this also holds true for how change agents engage with a system in which appreciative inquiry might be used. All choices they make when they first enter the system can already be seen as interventions. It matters who they speak to and regard as principals, how they perceive system limits, what they see as the purpose of change and how they assess the viability of appreciative inquiry as an intervention in contrast to alternative change methods. The idea that change is affected by any and all questions we ask as we participate in a network of change evoking conversations, emphasizes the importance of deliberate and timely design choices. Those choices are framed by our repertoires of looking and thinking and acting. Though none of them are cast in stone, all choices have impact and they are an expression of change agents' expertise and limitations to guide participants in helpful ways. In what follows we want to build on a tradition of contingency thinking in the field of organizational development and change (Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003; Cummings & Worley, 2004). This implies that we introduce some diagnostic awareness into our dialogic change perspective (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). We describe how generative change processes become feasible through the confrontation of appreciative inquiry possibilities with the situational characteristics of topic choice, change legitimacy and the existing change capacity.

What is the affirmative topic?

The poetic principle of appreciative inquiry states that in any human system we can find an indefinite number of issues to study. Assuming that what we focus on will grow, topic choice and definition are an essential first step in any appreciative change initiative. Typically, a group that represents the system will identify a focus of inquiry that is of high interest and will evoke

curiosity. The chosen topic is carefully worded in affirmative terms to generate a sense of positive anticipation (Barrett & Fry, 2005, p. 75). This may mean that issues which are initially stated in problematic terms, are reframed in wordings that point to the possibility of desired outcomes. The affirmative topic definition subsequently informs the questions that will guide the discovery conversations. Where appreciative inquiry is deliberate in its choice and wording of topics that are affirmative and attractive, it may ignore issues that seem to resist such framing but nevertheless have high generative potential. This is typically the case when positive anticipation is dampened by a history of repeated failures to address such issues effectively. The dominant repertoire of the organization can create a competency trap that acts as a barrier to explore new avenues that might work and create better futures (Levitt & March, 1988). As a result, certain issues may be perceived as “tough” or “wicked” and therefore less appealing (Vermaak, 2012). However, a lack of surface appeal does not need to correspond with a lack of generativity. Tough issues force us to expand action possibilities by studying them in ways that overcome our habitual and perhaps pessimistic understandings. Does this suggest that a wider range of issues can be addressed with appreciative inquiry? And if so, does that suggest different change designs as well?

We organized “Learning & Development” processes in many Dutch embassies. We found that the topics the participants tended to raise, were issues that did not lend themselves for innovation. Such issues had either limited meaning to them, little connection to their actual work or little connection to responsibilities they wanted to take on. This thwarted the change process because there was no real drive, no relevance or no ownership. An example of little drive was the “archiving” issue in Uganda. It was the first issue on the agenda and everybody thought it was important because archives were a mess, but nobody volunteered to address this “dissatisfier.” An example of unclear relevance to daily work was the “atmosphere and respect” issue in Kenya. This issue seemed to be endless: no matter what they did, there was always somebody who felt a lack of respect or warmth. How this affected their value creation to outside stakeholders was never discussed. An example of little ownership concerns grievances in Yemen about “headquarters” in The Hague where the minister intended to discontinue bilateral aid with the country. The embassy had good reasons to second guess this new policy: the Netherlands was one of the few bilateral donors left, it had a long positive track record and Yemen had many meaningful developmental issues. However, the embassy defined the issue outside their circle of influence: they complained rather than acted. Over time we as facilitators learned to be critical of topics that did not allow for generative inquiry. We made up three criteria that helped select topics more worthy of engagement. 1) Is an issue “hot” enough for participants? A lasting involvement requires participants to care enough about an issue: it needs to be a “satisfier” rather than a “dissatisfier.” 2) Is an issue relevant enough? Relevance

increases when value is added for outside stakeholders. This legitimizes the extra effort. In contrast, innovating because “it’s nice” never lasts. 3) Do the participants declare the issues within their domain? Since tough issues often transcend silos or tasks, system limits are open to debate. There is always a good argument to be made that others should act first. The flipside is that participants are free to define issues within their domain and take responsibility. The three criteria enabled great discussions with participants about what really mattered to them regardless of an issue’s surface appeal. Engaging with such issues allowed for more innovative and lasting changes.

It can be empowering to resist the participants’ first choice of topics. Issues that are urgent and that the organization knows how to address can easily take precedence over issues that are relevant but persist regardless valiant efforts. This is especially the case with tough issues that are characterized by high content- and social complexity (Vermaak, 2009). Such complexity is often greatest in the midst of the organization’s primary process where most factors and actors interact. It is here that added value is tangibly produced to outside stakeholders. It is also here that professionals’ pride and passion is invoked. As a result, these issues may potentially be the most rewarding to address, which is why Harpaz (2005) labels such complex issues as “fertile questions.” For instance, improving patient care in real time in a hospital setting might be one of the toughest issues to handle, but it is also highly rewarding and one of the strongest reasons why employees choose to work in health care. Fertile and wicked experiences can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. Enabling participants to experience the “fertile” side of complex issues seems to be a generative intervention.

We propose to include issues with varying surface appeal and complexity as possible affirmative topics. Key is their generative potential and the enthusiasm they can (sooner or later) evoke. Topics that have not received much attention, that appeal to professionals’ pride and passion and that require innovative thought and action should be prime candidates for inquiry. We also propose to see the selected topics as design indicators: different types of issues can imply different types of change design. For instance, the type of “relational engagement” depends greatly on the type of issue selected. If you want to study an organization’s identity and purpose, it makes good sense to invite all employees and external stakeholders. But if you choose to focus on innovation of primary processes with clients and colleagues, it makes more sense to work on the shop floor with those directly involved in daily operations.

How legitimate is the change?

Appreciative inquiry creates knowledge that helps members of a system to shape their reality according to their own imaginative and moral purposes (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987, p. 161).

As a generative provocation it wants to challenge and question the status quo and invite all involved “into new worlds of meaning and action” (Gergen, 1999, p. 116). Because of this normative and emancipatory stance, appreciative inquiry has been called a “positive revolution in change” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). From a dialogic perspective power processes are seen as central to the creation, dissemination and change of reality shaping discourses (Marshak & Grant, 2008, S17). In appreciative inquiry practice however, power dynamics may be downplayed by equating dislodgment with imagination and activism with participation. Those who critique the appreciative approach argue for instance, that such bias may obscure and maintain existing power differences by silencing critical voices and by providing elites with a new tool for manipulation and control (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008, p. 191). Not dealing with power dynamics and institutional forces would render appreciative inquiry only viable when top-management is explicitly legitimizing dislodgment of existing ideas and practices. This would diminish the scope of appreciative inquiry practice. Can appreciative inquiry be of value just as much or even more when its process and outcomes are controversial?

In a seminar we taught on dealing with “tough issues,” a participant brought in an issue he cared about and struggled with. It concerned the eroding trust clients had in his insurance company. The top of his organization wanted to embark on a PR campaign to convince clients of its trustworthiness and he was asked to implement it. This did not feel quite right to him. He told the story of how he recently helped a former client to write letters to his insurance company when they didn’t compensate damages his insurance policies should have covered. He was conflicted about this as his assistance was causing his company to lose money. We suggested that mixed loyalties might be part of the profession of insurance salesmen. This brought a dilemma to the surface: he shared how it was not legitimate for insurance salesmen to weigh these different interests themselves for each individual case. All such decisions were laid down in companywide rules and procedures, as the company feared that if any salesman was more lenient with his client than others, this might lead clients to demand the same preferential treatment and claims would skyrocket. In short: the professional judgment of individual salesmen had been replaced by companywide rules made with primarily the company’s interests in mind. This raised the question what a client would trust most: their direct experience with impersonal rules enforced by insurance firms, or the PR campaign that stated the company cared strongly for its clients and would go out of its way to make their lives easier. Everybody attending the seminar concluded they would trust their own experience and that the PR campaign was camouflaging the company’s one sided loyalty and lost professionalism. The participant felt inspired by the possibility to bring professionals and their relationships with clients back center stage. He went back to his company, suggesting to inquire into this possibility in relation to the “trust” issue. This was not met with enthusiasm by the top of the

organization. They perceived such inquiry to be dangerous and its outcome unpredictable. They insisted on implementing the PR campaign. The participant contributed as little as possible to the campaign. Instead he started an informal inquiry with his direct colleagues. They were triggered by the question how people, not rules, could make crucial decisions in their daily interactions with clients and how they could reclaim professional responsibility.

The case illustrates how inquiry may be both disruptive and generative, where the PR campaign as a “more of the same” effort is neither. Engeström (2001) suggests that contradictions are the driving force behind any innovation. When they become the heart of inquiry, chances increase of surfacing and breaking existing frames. This can easily solicit counter-pressures to keep the status quo in place. It may become risky to raise certain questions and people may censor themselves in terms of what they openly say and do. Organizational silence is then kept around the issues that may matter most (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In such situations change agents need ample political competence to facilitate breakthroughs (Hardy & Clegg, 1996). Boje (2010, p. 239) advocates an alliance between “critical inquiry” and appreciative inquiry, “whereby the former helps clients to deconstruct the embedded, dominant narratives, that oppress individual’s or organization’s life to open a space for appreciative inquiry to coalesce a new ‘positive’ story out of all the acts of resistance marginalized or outright erased by the dominant narrative order.” Another approach would be to explore the issue covertly rather than overtly: to go “under the radar” and continue the inquiry there where backlash of dominant coalitions is less disruptive (Kelman, 2005). The margin of the organization thus becomes the breeding ground for real innovation.

We propose to include the institutional dimension of a situational context as a design indicator by considering the legitimacy of the purpose and process of change within the system. Can change conversations be overtly conducted within the domain of dominant practice or is there a need for more covert change initiatives? Are change agents part of the power elite or are they less institutionally embedded actors who represent the marginalized voices? Do they have the competency to create viable conditions for challenging the status quo? Assessing the legitimacy of a transformative change can thus assist the design and defense of a viable appreciative inquiry process.

What is the existing change capacity?

Like other forms of dialogic OD, appreciative inquiry has a concern for capacity building and development of a human system (Bushe & Marshak, 2009 p. 360). Barrett and Fry (2005) for instance, describe appreciative inquiry as a process of building cooperative capacity for excellence and innovation. Such growing capacity is defined along the two interrelated

dimensions of the “elevation of inquiry” and the “extension of relatedness” (Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2003). Bushe (2011) emphasizes the importance of self-organizing capabilities to heighten the transformational impact of appreciative inquiry initiatives. This highly participative stance also creates a dilemma: the more innovative an approach is or the more innovation an issue requires, the more skillful participants need to be to pull it off. A chosen change design only comes truly alive by executing it in depth and congruently (Dunphy, 1996). When people lack adequate expertise, it can easily lead to mediocrity and disappointment. Appreciative inquiry firmly positions itself as an approach where participants are not objects of change, but subjects who are in the lead (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006). This raises the question whether the appreciative inquiry principles can only really come to life with participants who already have a high capacity to inquire, relate and organize for change. If so, should appreciative inquiry be limited to such target groups? Or should one settle for mediocrity when such capacity is not pre-existent?

Let’s briefly contrast two cases to shed some light on this question. One is a city in the Netherlands where even the most basic operational processes are out of control. It has a long history of neglect and people feel deflated by many failed attempts to set things right. In our dealings with this city we find that people have learned not to learn. They tend to either turn a blind eye or to come up with huge projects that will “magically” fix it all. Neither has helped them meet their challenges, but reflecting on this is rare. When they try, this leads to blame games as to who is responsible for this state of affairs. As a result, they have learned to suppress such reflection. They keep doubts or questions about what they are doing to themselves. We are now legitimizing such reflective inquiry in small groups of people who need to collaborate closely. It is a thoughtful process to restore the basic functions of the organization. It is not about innovating with leaps and bounds to create bold futures. Together we establish what constitutes “normal” behavior and reestablish a collaborative spirit. It is not about embracing diversity or supporting entrepreneurial deviancy. Making meaningful but small improvements in step with their current capacities allows them to succeed and build confidence, whereas overtaxing their abilities has led for many years to failed changes and growing cynicism.

In contrast, we present another case. This involves a network of change agents crosscutting different fields and professions. They come together in a learning community. They see “change” as their common vocation. We play a role as “shadow-consultants” helping them to think through their challenges at work and to take on an activist role as change agents. The network is a space to be inspired, to help each other and to acquire new perspectives for action. Back at their work they use such new insights to initiate inquiry and experimentation around

complex issues with their colleagues and clients. Some work to create safe city neighborhoods, others to transform environmental advocacy groups or revitalize care for the elderly. All of them choose challenging issues to work on and refuse to settle for how effective they and their organizations have been so far. When the participants of this group are confronted with issues they don't understand or don't know how to handle, it gets them motivated rather than deflated. Their drive is to learn as well as perform and their identity is linked to both. They like their work not because it is easy, but because it is hard. Their learning capacity allows them to take responsibility for complex change.

These cases illustrate how contrasting abilities allow for viable change processes with subjects in the lead inquiring and experimenting. The viability is safeguarded by keeping the ambition level in check with the existing change capacity so that participants can build on their successes rather than overtax their abilities. Appreciative inquiry serves multiple ambitions: it can unearth life centric potentials as well as build the capacity for inquiry and experimentation. In the case of the city administration where inquiry and relational capacities are small, building those may be more important than rigorous inquiry. In the case of the change agent network, insisting on the rigor of inquiry is a powerful way to challenge and build participants' capacities further. In both cases participants are guided to gradually take on more leadership roles which makes the process less dependent on (outside) facilitation. Facilitators need to find the right balance between leaving sufficient room for participants to learn to step into their shoes and safeguarding sufficient depth and quality of inquiry through experienced and craftful facilitation. Vermunt and Verloop (1999) label such productive balance between capacity development and research rigor as a state of constructive didactic friction that empowers both participants and change agents.

We believe that appreciative inquiry can be viable with groups with varying change capacity. We propose that considering change capacity as a design indicator allows for tailor made designs and facilitation that utilize and strengthen the existing cognitive and relational abilities to engage in steadily more complex processes of collaborative change.

Discussion: Situated Designs for an Appreciative Dialogic Approach

We have argued that the principles of appreciative inquiry can be translated into many different change designs. We have delineated three main dimensions for this design in terms of how its life-centric focus, its spirit of inquiry and its relational engagement may be put into practice. We propose that such design choices should be tailor made for each specific case. Key is to adapt appreciative inquiry possibilities into designs that fit with ongoing, practical realities. We have outlined three design indicators to assist such adaptation: the choice of affirmative

topic, the legitimacy of the change and the existing capacity for change. The link between proposing a change design and understanding a change context is hardly straightforward. Dependent on their perspective and experience, change agents will assess the situation differently and weigh the pros and cons of contrasting design options in various ways. It is thus a judgment call, but preferably a conscious one, so that the reasoning behind it can be scrutinized by those involved: does it stand to reason that the proposed change design is the most effective in the current situation?

To facilitate the choice in possible designs we promote the development of a situated approach to appreciative inquiry practice. We visualize the richness of contingent possibilities in an “AI-space” (see Figure 1.) where the axes are the design indicators and contrasting change designs take up different parts in that space. To illustrate the point, we have plotted three such designs within this “cube.”

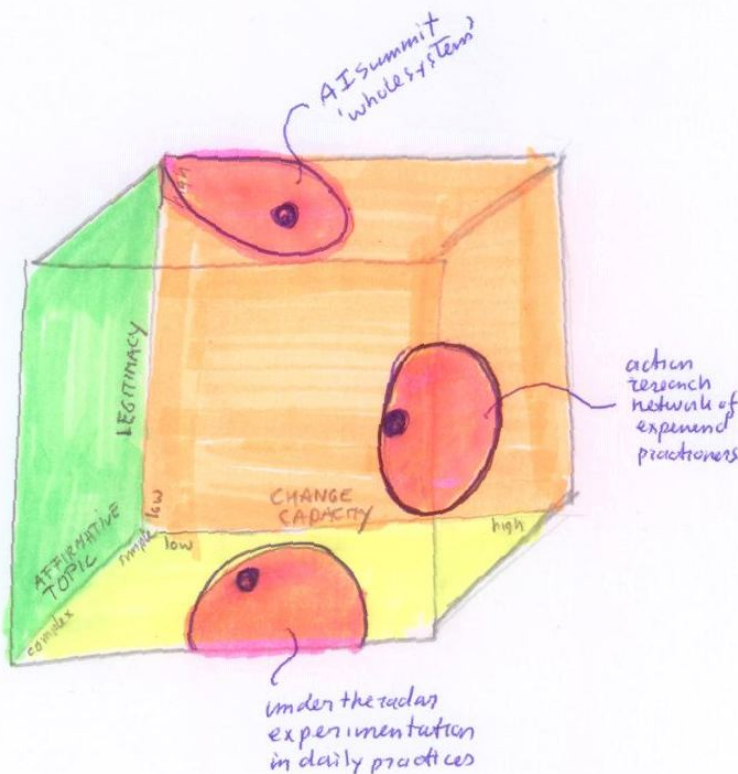


Figure 1. AI Space

A typical “AI Summit” is plotted as a change design at the top of the cube where the change is legitimized by top management. This allows for the process to be overt and include all stakeholders as the “whole system in the room.” In terms of other indicators like the

complexity of the issue and the organization's change capacity we see different types of summits. Complexity might for instance be sought by a fundamental and systemic rethinking of the purpose of the organization. Dependent on the relational capacity, management, employees and clients may be able to engage in conversations where hard questions are asked and subsequent discomfort is dealt with. In many summit designs inquiry is more geared towards a sense of wonder than a sense of rigor: daring imagination and designing possible futures hold center stage. To actualize envisioned possibilities, a shift in change design will be required where rigor comes more to the forefront and experimentation becomes key. A focus on the first two D's over the last two D's of the 4-D cycle is generally the case with appreciative inquiry summits and is a point of concern when the summit is regarded as a stand-alone change effort.

Another typical design would be "under the radar" experimentation in the daily practices of an organization by those involved. This is plotted at the bottom of the cube as this type of innovative change is counter to the dominant change practices of the organization and therefore lacks legitimacy: the change design engages "positive deviants" (Warren, 2003) in small operational groups away from the "center" of the organization engaging with issues that are quite complex. The latter D's of design and destiny are more leading than the D's of discovery and dream. The capacity of those involved has to be sufficient to take on facilitative roles in their daily experimentation and to muster enough research rigor to derive lessons from it. External facilitators can help to develop such capacity.

A third typical design would be action research by highly skilled practitioners to harvest, expand and showcase their practices. This is plotted around the front right vertical axis of the cube: such a selected group of experienced change agents have a high change capacity and want to focus on more complex issues. In terms of change design this implies a focus on research rigor to harvest new knowledge that brings the hidden finesses of their craft to light. This would include inquiring into the "shadow" of their practices in search for generative insights. Dependent on research topic and institutional dynamics, the legitimacy of such inquiry can be a real issue. Creating legitimacy over time, through showcasing valuable ideas and guiding others in trying those out, then becomes part of the inquiry design.

Enhancing generativity of any appreciative inquiry process

The originally stated principles of appreciative inquiry helped to understand "why things work." As time went on, people wanted to know "how to do it" and the 4-D cycle became the widely accepted change format with the "summit" as the widely accepted change arena. Other change designs and their facilitation have received much less attention. Through a lack of rich descriptions of alternative appreciative designs, we risk that the dominant format becomes

equated with all this approach has to offer and that implementations become watered down versions of its potential. “Paucity of experience” (Levitt & March, 1988) and limited understanding of appreciative inquiry’s subtleties then hamper the creative translation of its principles. Furthermore, “redundancy of experience” (ibid) with contradicting routine approaches (like top-down managed change), inevitably fills in the expertise gaps with the unfamiliar appreciative, dialogic approach. What looks like an innovative endeavor may in actuality then hardly reflect the richness of possible change dynamics, which may lead to disappointment in the approach and a reinforcement of habitual practice. This is unfortunate if we want to propel generative processes of organizational change.

With our situated approach we show that many contrasting appreciative inquiry designs are feasible. We propose that the generativity of any appreciative inquiry process depends on a careful matching of its underlying principles, with a contingent and fluid change design and a craftful facilitation. The bridge between principles and change design lies in the judgment what works best given the situation at hand. The bridge between change design and craftful facilitation lies in the ability to discern what enables generative change in the here and now and what is needed to make the process ongoing.

Facilitating appreciative inquiry as dialogic practice

Throughout this paper we have used the neutral term “change agent,” to imply that many can and should play an active role in the guidance of appreciative inquiry initiatives. Indeed, collaboration in inquiry is a pivotal quality of the approach (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). However, we also acknowledge that some are better versed in working with appreciative inquiry than others and may be hired by organizations for their “expert” facilitation. What are qualities of such professional expertise?

Someone who is able to turn appreciative inquiry into a craft should first of all be aware of the rich repertoire of thought and action that is delineated by its underlying theories. In order to utilize this repertoire, the facilitator should have the diagnostic skill to assess the feasibility of possible applications. Coming from a constructionist perspective, one should understand that such diagnosis is never objective and already an intervention in the ongoing process of change. Diagnosis can be embedded in appreciative inquiry as dialogic approach, when it becomes a recurrent topic of change inducing conversations. The guidance of shared questioning of what might be next best steps, allows for a diversity in perspectives in shaping emergent, contingent designs. A skilled facilitator will combine a sensitivity to the discursive realm of organizational life with an ability to nurture dialogue and language (story, metaphor and imagery) that may

inspire and inform change. This ability includes the competence to provoke and reframe the status quo by interrupting the dominance of certain voices and vocabularies.

There is wide scope of possibility for appreciative inquiry applications and we suggest that good facilitation will be able to bring out also its more subtle and underutilized dynamics and potentials. However, we realize that at some point we may overstretch the abilities of the facilitator and/or approach. Needed interventions may then simply fall outside the boundaries of our “AI cube” (Figure 1.). Realizing when this happens and knowing how to then proceed is in itself a sign of professional skill.

Conclusion

Over the last decades appreciative inquiry has developed into a widely used methodology for organizational inquiry and change. In workshops and conferences we notice an increasing number of practical applications that show contrasting and often hybrid change designs. These cases typically pay more attention to the “how” of change facilitation than to the guiding rationale. Best known scholarly publications on the other hand, pay more attention to theoretical underpinnings and a few dominant change designs, but give less detail about the craftful application of underlying principles into practice. We suggest that what the field needs most, are interchanges between both worlds which can lead to rich descriptions of how craftful facilitation can be grounded in an understanding of appreciative inquiry principles in contingent and contrasting change designs. Our paper can be read as an example of such interchange.

Through a confrontation between theory and practice, we have shown how the interpretation of appreciative inquiry principles can be stretched to create an expanded space for possible applications. We have joined and broadened the conversation around “positivity” in appreciative inquiry, by suggesting contrasting translations of its less debated principles as well. By stretching the appreciative repertoire, we also enrich its framing as dialogic change. Next to our embrace of a diagnostic awareness, we promote reflexive iterations between talk and action. When we test conversational insights through practical experimentation, we make change tangible and thereby available for further meaning making and knowledge creation.

The diversification of appreciative inquiry applications is a sign of its increasing maturity. With this rising popularity comes the challenge to uphold its robust conceptual grounding and to promote its practical finesse. How can we further develop appreciative inquiry as a fruitful interplay between principles, change designs and facilitation? We believe that a common language for contingent change design, with the vocabulary of design choices and indicators, may help. Change agents who use appreciative inquiry, should thoughtfully consider how to

best work with it in a specific context at a specific time. Ideally such consideration includes possibilities, challenges and risks next to their own facilitation abilities and the appropriateness of alternative change practices. Ultimately the question should be how to keep a generative process of change afloat.

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