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'makes magic.' As a presenter, facilitator and consultant, she inspires individuals and organizations to create positive futures and respond effectively to change by building on strengths and successes. Jeanie engages her clients in co-creating authentically appreciative and transformative relationships.

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The AI Circle

A Place to Develop Our Skills and Ourselves

ABSTRACT

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Network in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada meets once a month to explore skills and concepts related to AI that contribute to professional and personal development. Our circle practice creates a space for our internal selves to show up (who we are) as we share our strategies for working in our worlds (what we do).

The AI circle:

- inspires me to do the work I do and to keep practicing living an appreciative life. (Kathryn)
- is an experience that engages our hearts, our thoughts and our souls. (Claudine)
- is a source of kinship, learning, change and food for my soul. (Joanne)
- is a true celebration of inquiry. (Roxanne)
- is sharing of knowledge, done so willingly and non-selfishly among participants; moments of learning flow. (Maureen)

Development of the network: our organic self-organizing structure

This is the story of how the Appreciative Inquiry Network and its AI Circle came into being in Halifax. I moved from the West Coast to the East Coast of Canada over four years ago, from Vancouver to Halifax. My educational and organizational consulting practice was primarily focused on using Appreciative Inquiry in organizational and group development, strategic planning and training. As a consultant, not knowing anyone in my new home, moving was a complex transition.

My first task was to meet people and develop a network of colleagues and contacts. As I did this, I asked 'is there an Appreciative Inquiry Network in Halifax?' and the answer was 'no, but if you start one I'll come.' I had been actively involved in the network in Vancouver. It was an organic self-organizing group which provided a place to share AI experiences, learn from others, nurture our inner selves and enhance our AI practices. So, after a year of searching, I decided to start an AI network in Halifax, with support from the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) which provided space for us to meet. I sent out an email to people I had met inviting them to be part of the AI Network. Our contact list

Because members of the AI circle are familiar with the flow of the Four D's, there was the possibility of 'going deep' relatively quickly, and accessing the collective wisdom in a meaningful way.

began with about 50 people and it has grown to over 130. It has grown through my work with organizations in Nova Scotia and through the network members inviting friends and colleagues to join.

The network members

The network members are consultants (internal and external), facilitators, educators, coaches, leaders and others from many sectors who are interested in the practice of AI both as methodology and a way of being in the world every day. We use an organic self-organizing model where the leadership is shared. I write up brief meeting notes and keep the session topic/facilitator list; Kathryn Herbert manages our email list and sends out notices and notes; Claudine Lowry and Joan Moran provide and set up the space for us to meet at NSCC; and members of the network, often in pairs, volunteer to facilitate a workshop related to Appreciative Inquiry at our monthly meetings.

We are welcomed into the college by signs directing us to our room where we meet from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm. The classroom has been transformed into an open circle of chairs, and refreshments are provided which we so appreciate coming from our busy outer worlds. Over the last three years 32 people have facilitated meetings. This shared leadership is very powerful and people feel safe trying things out whether or not they are an expert. People try out what they are passionate about. As Kathryn says, 'this is an organic group that works so well because at its core is the sense of appreciation ... it is a welcoming group and it is open to whoever wants to come.'

I facilitated our first meeting. Some people were new to AI and curious so I gave a brief introduction to AI. We then paired up to tell stories of our best experiences using Appreciative Inquiry, whether we knew that was what we were doing or not. Pairs joined to form small groups to share themes that came out of the stories – people were energized and wanting more.

For the last three years, we have been meeting monthly to explore concepts related to AI and to be a place where we all could try out new ideas and activities. Within the first six months, we engaged in an AI about our group and developed a purpose statement:

'Our purpose as an AI network is to explore the applications of AI principles to situations based on the needs presented by members of the network, and to provide an environment in which we can continue to learn, experiment and grow together.'

Occasionally we do an AI in order to develop topics of interest that we will explore in future sessions. As well, people offer topics at the meetings and in-between email me and Kathryn with offerings.

Finding a sanctuary

We come together in appreciation for each other and the gifts each of us brings to the group. We value each other's contributions and respect our individual journeys in development. It is rare to find such a sanctuary in our worlds; we come to this reflective space, safely sharing ourselves with the others here.

The AI circle as a group is never the same ... some of us come regularly, most come occasionally and some can never get there because of the nature of their schedules but stay connected through the AI list:

'Every month there are different participants (drop-in nature of the circle) so lots of variety in group size, member backgrounds etc. and it always "works."' (Mara)

'I keep the list and I often run into people that know me from the messages that I send out and they all thank me, they want them to keep coming and even though they do not attend the meetings they have that connection with the group that they value.' (Kathryn)

Examples of our session topics

We explore topics that add to our AI tool kit, that expand our understanding of the principles underlying AI and that develop ourselves in our personal journeys of living appreciatively.

We have Defined topics, then Discovered the best that already exists, Dreamed an even better future and Designed ways to get there. This group is one way we live out our Destinies, sharing our successes and continuing to learn. For example, we have inquired into 'Being a Highly Engaged AI Network,' 'Transformational Connection,' 'Appreciating Negativity,' 'Working Effectively Through Conflict,' and we engaged in a 'Critical Appreciative Inquiry into Racism.'

Alan comments, 'I found it inspiring to see such a relatively large group of people willing to explore challenging and uncomfortable aspects of their own experience (my topic involved appreciating negativity). Because the members of the group are familiar with the flow of the Four D's, there was the possibility of "going deep" relatively quickly, and accessing the collective wisdom in a meaningful way.'

Exploring and engaging

We have explored AI principles – social constructionism, simultaneity, anticipatory, poetic and positive – in various ways, being and living AI. We have engaged in processes and concepts that align with AI – graphic recording, circle process, Theory U – and heard examples of their use, for example, in health care.

Our circle is a safe place to bring forward ideas to try out, as Kathryn did in a session on the soul of money. She says, 'I am really focused on the energy around money and so I did a session on that and it was received with gratitude, and it was not about what people thought about what I was presenting or even if they agreed with me. It did not matter.'

As well, we have explored personal development and our inner selves through sessions on meditation, manifesting, life mission, the Artist's Way, Sinqury (singing and writing AI songs), stress busting.... Shelley has led us through the use of masks, improvisation and body movement to develop our mind-body connection and says we 'touch base with a deeper self.'

Bob says that the AI network 'is a sustainable model, it continues to attract, and it is diverse in its offering.'

Pattie attends (when she can) because it is 'welcoming, thoughtful, creative, has application and provokes my own learning and practice.'

Wendy is returning after being away because 'these wonderful people have explored unexpected depths and will challenge me to move even more deeply into my own practice.'



When it's my turn, I use my magic facilitating wand as a talking stick. It is a multi-coloured feather duster adorned with trinkets that my workshop participants have added over the last 15 years.

Chris 'appreciates the variety of perspectives, not only on a topic being covered, but also on the interpretation of, the depth and breadth of, what AI means to different people.'

Our circle process

We sit in an open circle of chairs, beginning and ending our two hours together by passing a talking piece around the circle. Our talking piece often relates to the session; for example, when one of our members facilitated a session on learning how to do Graphic Recording she used a colourful marker as our talking piece. When two of us shared our experiences from the World AI Conference in Nepal, we used a pen that we got at the conference. Other pieces have been special objects such as a beautiful stone that one facilitator shared. When it's my turn, I use my magic facilitating wand as a talking stick. It is a multi-coloured feather duster adorned with trinkets that my workshop participants have added over the last 15 years.

As the talking piece moves around the circle, each person holding it has the opportunity to speak and be deeply listened to by the others or to pass and move it along to the next person. As we speak, we often are asked to respond to a question appropriate to the session; for the session on the World AI Conference, for example, we asked 'what would you like to know about the conference?' Some other example questions include:

- 'What do you appreciate about driving in a snow storm?' This elicited moving as well as funny stories at a winter meeting.
- 'Today is the first day of spring and the International Day for the Elimination of Racism. Can you think of appreciative words that might link those two events?' Responses included – hope, celebrating difference, connecting with people, energy, light, rebirth...
- 'How have you used AI or an appreciative perspective in the last month?'
- 'What do you have to appreciate in this moment?'

Our beginning circle includes introducing ourselves by name as new people join every month, and as Kathryn says, 'we leave all our titles at the door.' After our check-in circle we engage in the topic that has been offered for the session by our volunteer facilitator(s).

The conclusion

At the end of the session, we pass the talking piece around again for closing comments which usually include gratitudes for the facilitator(s), the opportunity to be there with the group and reflections on our learnings.

Being deeply listened to, both going into our time together and as we close, allows each of us to be present to the others, even if we choose to pass; we each have a voice and are recognized. Claudine says, 'participants are authentic with themselves and with each other; they listen quietly to the whole person and hold the space sacred...we honour ourselves, each other and our collective spirit.'

Together we create a space for our internal selves to show up (who we are) as we share strategies for working in our worlds (what we do). Basia says, 'this a group that is living AI. It's really about "being," and any sort of "doing" flows from that.'

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IAPG Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information



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Purpose of AI Practitioner

This publication is for people interested in making the world a better place using positive relational approaches to change such as Appreciative Inquiry.

The publication is distributed quarterly: February, May, August and November.

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ISSN 1741 8224

AI Practitioner © 2003-2010 Anne Radford