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# AI Research Notes

edited by Lena Holmberg and Jan Reed

AI Research Notes carries news of AI research developments. We'd like to make it as collaborative and appreciative as we can – we know that many of you are working and thinking about the relationship between academic research and AI, and that you have news, comments and questions which we'd like you to contribute.

## Research and Evaluation

These 'research notes' focus on the differences (if any) between research and evaluation. To some, this distinction may be spurious, but if you move between the worlds that have been constructed around the two activities, you can feel confused (Reed, 2007)<sup>1</sup>. Evaluation can be characterized as an activity which is managed by the host organisation, who will use the information to shape internal development, while research can be characterized as activity led by people engaged in an academic world who wish to use the data to inform wider debate on theories and models.

This suggests two areas of difference. Firstly, there can be a difference in how the project starts, whether it is commissioned by the host, or funded by an external agency. Secondly, there might be differences in how the information gathered is used. In evaluation the information might be used internally, to aid development, while in research, information might be opened to a wider audience, who will critique the academic validity and contribution of the study.

We can see differences, then, in the starting and ending of the project, and these may shape the way that the AI study is done. Being aware of these contexts may well be useful for anyone involved in AI. To explore this further we have a discussion piece from Matt Dunn, who lays out some of the differences as seen from a traditional point of view. He goes on, however, to suggest a non-traditional synergy between evaluation and research.

The second piece is an account, by Margaret Wright, of a project in which she carried out an evaluation while a researcher was carrying out a study at the same time. Initial suspicion of the researcher turned to gratitude that there was someone available to verify the data. This gratitude turned to concern, however, that this verification might not understand or support AI. This sums up the way in which research and evaluation can work together – they can both challenge and support each other.

<sup>1</sup> Reed J (2007) *Appreciative Inquiry: Research for Change*. Sage, New York.

The third item, from Karstein Haarberg, tells of a way of integrating AI and research. This is done by using some of the techniques of research, namely triangulation, to check out the information collected. Perhaps this is one way forward for AI, to use the best from both evaluation and research, the importance of immediate events that figure in evaluation, and the 'standing back' that features in research. In this way we can appreciate the value of each separately and together.

The fourth piece, from, Kaj Voetmann, points to the ways in which AI research challenges the ideas which were the foundation of Enlightenment science. One of these ideas was that of 'good' science being universal, not local, and AI is very connected to local human contexts and endeavours – human life is a stimulus for AI action. This, perhaps, is a challenge for AI research, to take the stimulus of a local context, and expand the lessons universally.

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### Combining Research and Evaluation

Matt Dunn, Monks' Dyke Technology College, Louth, Lincolnshire, UK,  
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From a traditional perspective, research and evaluation would appear to have many differences. Evaluation seeks to establish the worth or value of a specific internal context, whilst research aims, in the main, to remain value-free. Research is often designed to generalise to a wider population, whilst outcomes from evaluation are usually shared internally with those who have a vested interest in the process. Although research produces findings which may lead to changes in policy or practice, evaluation seeks always to build upon findings and impact changes and improvements as a result. Replication and peer review are largely expected in research, whilst this is not necessarily the case in evaluation due to the nature of its contextual use.

However, there are similarities, which depend largely on which paradigm and methodology is followed. Research and evaluation rely on the collection of empirical data and may use similar methods of data collection; both are concerned with issues of reliability and validity, although these may be subject to more robust scrutiny in academic research. In social research, obvious comparisons of evaluation can be made to ethnography and case study research, focusing on internal or context-specific issues, whilst action research inherently aims to generate change and improvement in a constant cycle of evaluation.

The presence of differences and similarities may be considered moot: one sees these two methods of investigation as discreet, but could they in fact be combined in synergy? In the field of academic research, for example, there is certainly a case for greater consideration of this possibility. Through careful research design, it is conceivable that a combination of research and evaluation could provide the underpinnings for a transformative model of school improvement. A combination of Appreciative Inquiry and action research, for example, could be used to support an approach that integrates professional development with self-evaluation and organisational development. Just a thought...

### Challenge and Support

Margaret Wright, Resolution, Edinburgh  
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When I embarked on a dream project i.e. working in schools using AI, I found it curious that the client who employed me had also employed a researcher – my thinking was that the AI method itself was sufficient as it was action research. However the piece of work was not begun by my AI colleague or myself, but was underway by the time we were brought in. The funder was also on board so we were past the post in terms of setting goals. An independent researcher was there and to be fair the project was much bigger than just the AI piece we did. Therefore it made sense for the client, a charity with only a few staff, to employ a researcher. There was a separate funder too for the AI piece and a lot of time, we were told, had been spent in communicating the method, its possible impact and results in order to achieve the funding.

In fact, from initial feelings that the researcher was superfluous and was of course an expense which might have gone into the pot for the AI research, I began to feel that the other researcher would be an asset independently verifying what the folks involved in the work thought (i.e. the pupils and the teachers) in case there was any thought on behalf of the client or the funder that we were skewing the results. In other words, there were probably two opportunities for the folks involved to comment and reflect on the AI work i.e. when we, the consultants were involved, and also when the researcher came around too. The initial delight at not having to write up the project and read what an independent researcher had written turned to concern that justice had not been done to the work or to the potential for the future and given that this was a pilot then this was critical.

I have developed an evaluation concept which uses a triangulation of methods and data sources ... of which AI is an important ingredient.

### Using AI in Triangulation

Karstein Haarberg, Haarberg Consulting, Oslo,  
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My work involves carrying out evaluations of development aid, including projects and programmes. Although evaluation methodologies based on AI principles are available, these have not normally been considered suitable for use under the tight terms typically presented by bilateral and multilateral agencies. Now, based on many years of experience with traditional social science evaluations and training in change facilitation, I have developed an evaluation concept which uses a triangulation of methods and data sources. This consists of both questionnaire surveys and participatory sessions, of which AI is an important ingredient.

When I present the evaluation concept to the development community, my experience is that many people quickly become comfortable with it, and find the AI element especially interesting. Three arguments particularly support the use of AI in the evaluation of development aid:

1. Development aid has a long history of analysing problems, with little successful outcome. Just as the field of organisational development has moved away from the problem approach, so too should development aid.

2. Most evaluations base their recommendations on observations of failure and deficits. Using this approach the evaluator lacks sufficient and appropriate information to assess what might lead to success in a given situation. AI, conversely, builds on success and creates ownership.

3. Resistance to focusing on appreciating successes comes from the anxiety of potentially missing wrong doings or failures in projects and programmes. However, I explain that AI does pick up on problems but by focusing on areas for improvement, and stakeholders' wishes for something which better the current situation. This is achieved by reformulating problem/deficit statements.

As a drastic refocus for some of the development agencies, AI naturally provokes some resistance and anxiety. But, as the wish for a better approach is felt deeply and urgently by many, my experience is that AI is readily accepted.

John Dewey wrote that inquiry is a natural part of human life. Appreciative Inquiry is a special kind of living life as a human.

### Appreciative Inquiry as a Research Method

Kaj Voetmann  
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Once upon a time, Appreciative Inquiry began as an action research method. Later it expanded into an action learning method. In the tradition of the Enlightenment, this makes it a strange kind of research. The scientific ideals of the Enlightenment were:

- Good science should be written not spoken
- Good science should be universal not local
- Good science should be timeless not time-specific
- Good science should use unambiguous words in an unambiguous way

But Appreciative Inquiry breaks with these ideals. As well, in Enlightenment ideals, research is about the past. Appreciative Inquiry included researching the future. This broke with validity and reliability. The future does not exist and we cannot repeat it, according to Enlightenment ideas.

David Cooperrider and Frank Barrett claimed that action research never produced any theories. I believe this is 'theory' according to the tradition of the Enlightenment. Appreciative Inquiry produces different kinds of theory. Vernon Cronen calls them practical theories. These theories are reflected practices, and practices are practiced theories.

The theories are connected to practice. Appreciative Inquiry has another connection to practice that does not belong to the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment favours abstraction, while Appreciative Inquiry favours stories with real people facing real challenges with all the emotions involved in that. My experience is that it is the stories that move communities and organisations.

John Dewey wrote that inquiry is a natural part of human life. Appreciative Inquiry is a special kind of living life as a human. Traditional research is done by

people who have been trained in research in order to publish in academic papers. They try to find 'the truth'. Appreciative Inquiry is not looking for 'the truth'. It is looking for useful solutions to the challenges of the times.

I have been working with Appreciative Inquiry for fifteen years. It started with two great demands on me: 1) I had to create the research design, and 2) I had to write the research questions.

Appreciative Inquiry is an adaptive method; there is no universal method in AI. It is easy to produce theory from single cases with Appreciative Inquiry. It is easy to create action learning from these theories. It is harder to publish in 'scientific' journals and magazines.

Appreciative Inquiry produces very good science and theory. We just have to become better at producing practical theories.

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### Editors' Note

AI Research Notes will carry news of AI research developments. We'd like to make it as collaborative and appreciative as we can – we know that many of you are working and thinking about the relationship between research and AI, and that you have news, comments and questions which we'd like you to contribute.

The next issue (November 2009) will focus on the use of AI in Information Technology research while the February 2010 column will be dedicated to practitioners appreciating AI research and suggesting ideas for AI researchers to pick up. Hopefully this can turn our column into a dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

Please send suggestions and material to [jan.reed@unn.ac.uk](mailto:jan.reed@unn.ac.uk) or [lmholmberg@gmail.com](mailto:lmholmberg@gmail.com). Please continue to send us material and suggestions for themes.

Jan and Lena

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### Useful Tools on AI and Research

Impact of Appreciative Inquiry on Research: Experiences, Reflections and Thoughts for the Future.

*AI Practitioner*, November 2007.

Guest editors: Professor Jan Reed and Dr. Lena Holmberg.

Impact of AI on Research – the Latest Experience.

DVD documentation of the workshop led by Professor Jan Reed and Dr. Lena Holmberg on 9th November 2007 in Gateshead, UK.

Both available from [www.aipractitioner.com](http://www.aipractitioner.com)



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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.

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