



Lena Holmberg

co-founded Apprino (www.apprino.com) in 2005 to use AI to develop individuals, groups, organisations and innovation systems. She has an MA in Computational Linguistics and a PhD in Educational Research. She is a keen blogger.

Contact: lenaholmberg.blogspot.com
lena.holmberg@apprino.com



Jan Reed

PhD, BA, RN has been involved in research for many years. She has a nursing qualification, and teaches and supervises healthcare students at the Northumbria University. Her interest in the possibilities and contributions of Appreciative Inquiry research to the processes of change has recently resulted in a book.

Contact: jan.reed@unn.ac.uk



AI Research Notes

edited by Lena Holmberg and Jan Reed

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.

Welcome to this new section

We are starting up a section of the AI Practitioner which we've called 'Research Notes.' It will carry news of AI research developments. We would like to make it as collaborative and appreciative as we can – many of you working and thinking about the relationship between research and AI have news, comments and questions which we would like you to contribute. The section will also carry news of any feedback or statements from research funders or other organisations. We'd also like to include any comments or observations that readers might like to make, or any questions that they have.

In this section

Invitation to contribute

AI and Research Frameworks by Jan Reed, Northumbria University, England

Research in Progress: Successful Businesses and Families by Gervase Bushe, Simon Fraser University, Canada

Research in Progress: Using Appreciative Inquiry to explore the leadership of directors of adolescent-focussed NGOs in New Zealand

AIP Related Resources

Invitation to contribute

The next AI Practitioner issue is May 2009. Later issues are in August and November 2009.

In the spirit of sharing ideas and experiences, we'd like to invite you all to send us your news and comments, so that we can include them in our section, however short or tentative they might be. The deadline for contributions to the May 2009 issue of AIP is 1 March, 2009.

The section follows on from our AIP research issue, and the workshop that we ran. These raised many issues and conversations about ways of supporting and doing AI research, were fascinating and fruitful. We'd like to see these conversations continue, and hope that Research Notes will contribute to this.

Please send suggestions and material to jan.reed@unn.ac.uk or lena.holmberg@apprino.com

AI Research Notes

AI and Research Frameworks

Jan Reed

Northumbria University, England

Contact: jan.reed@unn.ac.uk

The issues which seem to be key in the development of AI research revolve around the way in which it fits with or challenges existing research frameworks. These frameworks are used by those who evaluate research, often research funders, examiners and editors. These people need to know that studies are sound, and use a number of criteria to judge this. AI research can clash with these criteria in a number of ways:

- **Individuality** – critical audiences are often concerned with individual responsibility and accountability for research. For funders it is important to know who will manage the money and resources for the study, and how the fund holder will report on their use. For examiners it is important to be sure that learning and insight is a feature of the individual being examined, so that if this individual is awarded an academic qualification or grade, examiners can be sure that the award has been given to the right person, and that they have earned it. For editors it can be important to know which individual can be responsible for checking texts, correcting errors and checking details. The legal framework of copyright is evident here, as ownership of text and responsibility for it is clearly identified.

AI research, however, is often collaborative, involving many different partners and people in many different ways. This makes it difficult to identify a responsible individual, as in traditional research. It is this collaboration, however, which gives AI research a particular flavour and makes it effective in changing practice – by exploring what has worked, developments can be integrated with practice, and this exploration is appreciative if it acknowledges and builds on the contributions of significant people in the process of exploration.

- **Pre-planning** – some audiences feel more comfortable with studies which demonstrate evidence of foresight and planning, and this is particularly important for funders, who might need to know that the study has identified milestones and targets, and that these can be built in to budgets and programmes. For funders it is difficult to plan ahead if a study does not fit to schedule. For examiners, too, the skills of planning a study can form part of the assessment.

AI research, however, is often responsive to the needs and interests of collaborators, and plans may need to change. If, for example, a study ignored context and environment, and doggedly followed a plan set up before the study began, we would not necessarily think of it as appreciative because it might portray changes as problems to be overcome, rather than challenges to be embraced.

Pre-planning, then, might conflict with AI processes which are responsive and appreciative of real-life contexts. Trying to 'control' these contexts may lessen the impact of AI studies on practice and action, and AI research does have practice development as a goal. Having a study set in an unchanging environment may not reflect the environments that partners live in, and miss an opportunity to explore the strategies that they have developed in response to these changes.



- Fitting in with existing research and practice models – some audiences prefer to look at studies as part of a developing body of knowledge. For funders this can place a study alongside other developments in knowledge, and examiners can place a study in the context of debates in theory and methodology. Editors can judge whether a study fits with their dissemination strategy.

This 'fitting in' allows audiences to decide how and where a study contributes to a body of knowledge, and whether it confirms or challenges this. For AI research this may present difficulties, especially if the approach is seen as a challenge to established approaches to exploring research questions. This means that AI research can be difficult to link to other programmes of research, and so funders, examiners and editors have problems in supporting studies which seem to reject existing knowledge. Of course this process of challenge is one way in which knowledge develops, but sometimes the challenge may seem discordant – unappreciative!

- Bias can seem to be a feature of AI research, as it explicitly explores achievements and practice which have worked well. This can be viewed as a problem, if research is thought of as being an objective process, and this objectivity is demonstrated by its non-partisan approach, looking at failures and problems that arise.

There are at least two questions that can be asked about this idea of objectivity:

Firstly, we can ask about whether it is really neutral, or whether there may be a temptation to intensively explore problems as a way of demonstrating academic rigour and distance from the people being researched. This 'neutrality', then, may be a bias in the opposite direction to AI – looking at problems rather than achievements, and possibly perpetuating ideas of researchers as experts who will examine practice from a distance. If we want to move towards collaborative research, like AI, then this focus may be counterproductive.

The second question follows on from this, and it is in some ways a pragmatic question. AI research can be seen as an effective strategy for opening up conversations about practice, as it can be presented as a way of making research acceptable to the people being interviewed or observed. The question, then, is whether this appreciative stance serves as a strategy for encouraging participation but does not reflect the true AI nature of the study, which is to explore examples of achievement, and to develop understanding and knowledge from this. If AI is used as a disguise for this goal, then we need to ask if the study will really contribute to an appreciative understanding. This may be through the simple process of directing the study towards appreciation in the context of a history of 'unbiased' research, which may have only looked at the frequency of achievement rather than its nature, but it needs to be clarified.

All of these debates (and there may be others) are open for engagement, and it is, perhaps, an indication of the relative infancy of AI research that they have not been publicly explored to a great extent so far. We hope that this section will promote this debate, by disseminating news of studies and developments in AI research, news which we hope you will contribute.

For more information, please e-mail jan.reed@unn.ac.uk.

AI Research Notes Continued

Research in progress: Successful Businesses and Families

Gervase Bushe
Simon Fraser University, Canada
Contact: bushe@sfu.ca
www.gervasebushe.ca

This study is scheduled to be completed in 2010. The proposed research is motivated by the following key questions: How can family business support the development of successful business families? And, conversely, how can successful business families support the success of family businesses? The research team assembled for this project proposes to develop a research methodology to try and answer those questions.

Our approach takes the point of view that successful families are able to manage differences and conflicts, while supporting individual members through challenging phases of life. The challenge of the family is to support the development of family members into individuals with a sense of their own separate autonomy and self-identity.

Our specific objectives include:

- Developing an Appreciative Inquiry interview guide that will be effective in eliciting high-quality narratives with rich descriptions of ways in which families and business can support each other's success
- Exploring a variety of data analysis methods for their generative potential in working with narrative data
- Creating models of how strong families contribute to the success of business and how business ownership contributes to the success of families

We hope to identify and study 10-12 families which own substantial businesses that have existed for at least 4 generations, where a sizable percentage of the family is still involved in the business and there is no history of major intra-family conflict resulting in disconnection and a continuing lack of contact. We will interview inter-generational family members about their experience of the family and the business using Appreciative Inquiry-style interview guides, which focus on gathering 'best of' stories. These narratives will be analyzed in order to develop theories and models that can be empirically verified in future research.

For more information, e-mail Bushe@sfu.ca.

Research in progress: Using Appreciative Inquiry to explore the leadership of directors of adolescent-focused NGOs in New Zealand

Chris Jansen
University of Canterbury, New Zealand
Contact: chris.jansen@canterbury.ac.nz

Directors in adolescent-focussed non-government organisations (NGOs) have critical roles in leading organisations that focus on developing young people and responding to a diverse range of community needs. The complexity and intricacies of their leadership roles have not been explored in depth in New Zealand. In addition, pathways in the development of leadership for such organisations are unclear.

This PhD research project is using an Appreciative Inquiry research methodology over an eight month period from November, 2008 to June, 2009, where approximately 20 directors from the Canterbury area are exploring their own leadership in a collaborative manner with peers in similar roles. The key areas of focus are:

- What beliefs, values and actions characterise leaders in adolescent-focussed NGOs in NZ when they are operating at their peak?

- What impact does exploring NGO leadership appreciatively have on practice?

Participants were selected using a snowballing technique based on peer recognition, and methods of collaboration were negotiated with the participants at the first AI focus group in November, 2008. These methods included 'learning sets' of 3-4 leaders meeting monthly to discuss areas of common focus, a networking website (www.leadngo.co.nz) to act as a forum for discussions, book reviews of key leadership literature, a professional development day in 2009, etc.

The results of this study are intended to assist in capability-building of current and emerging leaders within this sector. It is intended that the participants in this study will help design a dynamic, contextualised and user-friendly model of leadership for adolescent-focussed NGOs in New Zealand, while also experimenting with an effective process within which to develop these leadership competencies.

For more information, e-mail chris.jansen@canterbury.ac.nz



AIP related resources

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.

DVD Impact of AI on Research – the Latest Experience. Workshop led by Professor Jan Reed and Dr. Lena Holmberg on 9th November 2007 in Gateshead, UK.

Available from www.aipractitioner.com.



International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

Inside:

- 4** Introduction by Julie Barnes and Anne Radford
We are currently excited by ideas of boldness and are inspired by the bold stories we are presenting here.
- 7** **Part 1: New Models, New Ways, New Places**
A New Business Model: An Insider's Guide by Anne Radford
Anne Radford interviews David Gilmour and Joep C. de Jong.
- 11** Safeguarding Children: a Compelling New Model by Lesley Moore and Julie Barnes
This is a story about an important idea – using AI to learn about what works in safeguarding children – and acting on it.
- 15** From Scrutiny to Appreciative Inquiry: Shifting Culture and Practice in Adoption and Fostering Panels by Liz Martins
The culture of spotting what is wrong is ingrained in the adoption and fostering panel world. This article describes work that promotes an alternative model with practical strategies.
- 19** Taking Appreciative Inquiry Boldly into the World of Adult Social Care by Carolyn Caldwell and Angela Hayes
Social care for adults is undergoing a radical transformation in England.
- 24** Creating a Vision for an Appreciative Future with West Midlands Fire Service by Steve Loraine
The West Midlands Fire Service adopted AI when creating a vision for their service for 2013.
- 28** Imagine St Helens – Town-wide Appreciative Boldness by Ann Shacklady-Smith
How does a community-led organisation relying on volunteer time secure a genuine community voice?
- 32** **Part 2: Unfolding Destinies**
Leaders Going Boldly Forward by Wendy Briner and Eunice Aquilina
'We wanted to discover leaders' stories of boldness.'
- 39** Learning from the Military: Developing an AI-based Project Debrief Toolkit by Tim Slack
AI, military history and experience of urban regeneration projects contributed to the development of the Project debrief toolkit.

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

Inside continued:

- 44** Out-SMART and AI: Connecting, Reflecting and Team building through mini-adventures by Paul Dearlove
The Out-SMART course is about creating solutions through a series of mini-adventures.
- 48** A Big Conversation...a Client's First Impressions of Working with Appreciative Inquiry by Sharon Sephton
The Big Conversation: the future of health, arts and well-being in Liverpool.
- 49** A Wordle by Jo Tait
Jo's connection with Appreciative Inquiry expressed as a 'word cloud'.
- 50** At the Speed of the Imagination ... from Coaching to Applying AI in Six Ways in as Many Months! by Margaret Wright
People get to the point where they have done the reading and want to apply it.
- 53** Impact on Professional Lives, a Church and Plastics Factory: A Bold AI Journey by Roger Wythe
Three examples of boldly applying Appreciative Inquiry in different contexts.
- 56** What Does It Take to Transform a Nation? by Lena Holmberg
Imagine using our AI network to transform the region or country where we live.

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- 58** **AI Research Notes**
by Jan Reed and Lena Holmberg
Research Notes carries news of AI research which is about to start, is in progress or has been completed. Contributions are from researchers around the world.

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- 63** **About the May 2009 Issue**
Intergenerational Dialogue edited by Joyce Lemke, Marjorie Schiller and Peter Whitehouse
The guest editors of the May 2009 issue invite practitioners to think about intergenerational conversations, and their power and merit.

- 64** **AIP World Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information**



AIP World Contacts and AI Practitioner Subscription Information



Australia

Sue James info@bjseminars.com.au

Liz Mellish info@mellish.com.au

Canada

Western Gervase Bushe bushe@sfu.ca

Toronto Maureen McKenna maureenmckenna@sympatico.ca

Winnipeg Joyce Rankin jrankin39@shaw.ca

Colombia

Sara Inés Gómez sarinagom@cable.net.co

Denmark

Charlotte Dalsgaard cd@harbohus.dk

Mette Jacobsgaard 101572.622@compuserve.com

Henrik Kongsbak henrik@resonans.dk

Germany

Southern Germany Walter Bruck contact@wb-consult.de

Northern Germany Christoph Beck info@tricon-beratung.de

Dorothe Liebig dorothe.liebig@t-online.de

Hong Kong

Catriona Rogers c.rogers@re-authoringlives.com

Italy

Yvonne Bonner y.bonner@re.nettuno.it

Scotland

Margaret Wright mwright@resolution-scotland.com

South Africa

Bridget Woods bridget@fireglow.co.za

Sweden

Sven Sandstrom and Lisen Kebbe sven@kebbe.se

The Netherlands

Joep de Jong joepc@mac.com

Maarten Thissen maarten@djehoty.com

USA

East Coast Marge Schiller margeschiller@yahoo.com

West Coast Steve Cato scato1@centurytel.net

AI Practitioner Editor/Publisher

The editor/publisher is Anne Radford. She is based in London and can be reached at editor@aipractitioner.com.

The postal address for the publication is:

303 Bankside Lofts, 65 Hopton Street, London SE1 9JL, England.

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7633 9630

Fax: +44 (0)20 7633 9670

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 [Back to Table of Contents](#)

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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.

