AI Version 2.0: New Models of Appreciative Inquiry in the Digital Age

Lindsey N. Godwin and Soren Kaplan
l.godwin@moreheadstate.edu and soren@icohere.com

In this article we explore four technology-enabled models that are being applied to AI processes and envision how the underlying tools and principles of these models will continue to contribute to the future of the field. We describe how a variety of online conferences have facilitated global gatherings and discuss how technology is augmenting traditional AI summits as well as transforming the process by engaging entire organizational systems. Finally, we consider how opportunities for AI training are expanding where people are now able to learn the principles and practice of AI through instructor-led online workshops and seminars.

Introduction

As trumpeted by Thomas Friedman, technology has helped make the world flat once again. Today's ever-expanding technology opportunities have not gone unnoticed by AI practitioners. Innovative models of Appreciative Inquiry that leverage collaborative technologies are emerging which open new participative opportunities, tap into the collective wisdom of the whole system and drive positive change at the 'scale of the whole'. Using illustrative AI projects and processes that we each have either led or been directly involved in, we explore four specific technology-enabled models and envision how the underlying tools and principles of these models will continue to contribute to the future of Appreciative Inquiry.

Our experiments with using technology to enable and enhance various AI processes began through our close collaborations with David Cooperrider. In the spirit of wanting to find innovative ways to bring entire systems together for positive change projects, David was interested in exploring how online collaborative tools might help reduce some of the challenges that emerge when trying to connect whole systems effectively, and turn these perceived challenges into significant opportunities for accelerating positive change.

Anyone who has led an AI change process has likely met with the challenges we believed that technology could help address, including:

- Truly engaging the 'whole system' vs. just a representative sample of 'key stakeholders'
- Involving distributed organizational locations so that even the most remote group feels as important as the 'main office'
- Accelerating change in the face of resource limitations such as time, money and space capacity
- Overcoming organizational inertia by tapping into the best knowledge, stories and shared resource capacities of the whole system and making this available anytime and anywhere to anyone

To begin to explore how technology might help address these issues and enhance the AI

process, a number of AI-focused tools and capabilities were designed and integrated into iCohere's software. The resulting suite of web-based collaborative technology tools has collectively become known as 'OvationNet'[i] and has been used by a wide range of organizations to advance their AI-focused strategic change initiatives.

Online Conferences Connect New Voices

Some of our early experiments with applying technology to the AI process came in the form of online, appreciative-based conferences hosted by Case Western Reserve University. In 2004, Case's Center for Business as Agent of World Benefit (B.A.W.B.) (http://worldbenefit.case.edu) hosted their first completely online conference. Using a collaborative online technology platform provided by iCohere, a global space was created for 850 registrants from 50 countries to come together and discuss, inquire and dream about how business can be an agent for world benefit. Paralleling the features of a traditional conference, the event included live (synchronous) discussions, an exhibition hall, pre-recorded keynote and workshop presentations by a variety of scholars and practitioners, as well as asynchronous threaded discussions born from and sustained by participants' specific areas of interest. Costs that typically prevent people from participating in such an event were removed, including significant time away from work, travel and lodging. We saw how this approach to conferencing opened the door for people not only across the country, but across national borders, to gather and collaborate online.

The success of this conference laid the foundation for two other online conferences held in subsequent years that used an AI approach to explore other topics regarding business and its relationship to wider society. In 2006, Case Western collaborated with the UN Global Compact and the Academy of Management to host the BAWB Global Forum that combined a face-to-face conference in Cleveland with an online conference where people across the globe who could not join the meeting in Cleveland could connect and contribute to advancing the dialogue and research agenda on the role that business can play in creating positive social change in the world.

While challenges such as language barriers and availability of Internet connectivity persist, the possibility for true global dialogues were realized through these events. Such online and mixed conference designs illustrate how technology is enabling people who would not otherwise be able to meet to come together to reflect and share stories.

Enhancing the Traditional AI Summit Process

We have also seen the power of technology to augment traditional AI summit processes. Summits such as those with the Toronto District School Board and San Diego County used OvationNet technology to help support the pre-summit discovery process. For each of these projects, participants conducted discovery interviews prior to the summit and captured and shared them via a secure online community space. The narratives were then coded and summarized as input going into the summit, creating a rich data base of positive stories for people to build on immediately during the normal summit process. For example, over 1000 interviews were conducted by hundreds of elementary, middle school and high school students before the Toronto summit, demonstrating the potential to elevate the collective

experience and wisdom of the system in ways that would otherwise be impossible using conventional techniques.

At other summits, such as the Environmental Protection Agency Leadership Summit held in 2003, technology played a role at each stage of the conference. As in the San Diego and Toronto summits, participants conducted pre-summit discovery interviews and submitted their summaries via a secure online workspace. As before, these summaries were available for participants to read and reflect on prior to coming to the summit, thus helping establish a spirit of inquiry and shared learning before the summit even began. Also in the online space, participants were invited to view pre-recorded, on-demand presentations that helped give an overview and frame for the event. Other logistical information about the summit was also shared online, creating a resource area for participants before they set foot in the summit. During the summit, team work spaces were created in the online community as groups emerged during the Design phase of the event. These work spaces helped support the work of the summit even after it ended, as teams were encouraged to share materials and resources with each other immediately afterward.

Expanding the Summit to Engage the Whole System

The collaborative potential of technology is also transforming the very foundations of the summit model – in ways that give every member of the 'whole system' an opportunity to participate directly. Take World Vision's 'Big Goals' summit which engaged almost 5000 participants in a summit in Bangkok. With over 20,000 employees in 100 countries, World Vision (WV) is the world's largest distributor of food and feeds to over seven million people each year through its international relief programs. Technology played an essential role in the success of this organization's unique summit process. Before the summit began, all 20,000 employees and other stakeholders from World Vision were asked to connect into a virtual community created for the organization and create an individual or group profile, introducing themselves to their fellow World Vision colleagues around the globe. 4500 participants ultimately accessed and contributed online in English, Spanish, or French depending on their preferred language. Additional online pre-work included sharing best practices from across the globally-dispersed organization. These stories became an online resource of examples of World Vision at its best, which the Bangkok summit participants could learn from and build upon.

Virtual participation continued even once World Vision's summit began in Bangkok, with the online community space continuing to serve as a link through which the entire organization could participate in the summit process. With the help of a round-the-clock support staff, highlights from the face-to-face meeting in Bangkok were summarized, translated (from English into Spanish and French) and posted on the community site. Then, overnight, the rest of the organization around the world was invited to read, react and vote on the issues and ideas that emerged from the face-to-face summit. These entries were translated back into English and summarized in a report for the face-to-face summit participants. Online participation included almost 5000 virtual voices each day representing 60 countries.

Merging virtual and face-to-face collaboration

The World Vision summit is an illustration of how virtual and face-to-face processes can inform one another. This groundbreaking summit created an event that wove together an entire system, merging virtual and face-to-face collaboration in ways that tapped the collective wisdom of the organization. Within an extremely short period of time, in a way seldom seen in traditional planning meetings, an entire system – not just its representatives – was able to collaborate together in a meaningful way.

We recognize that such a large-scale process may not be suitable for every organization, as it requires additional resources in the form of individuals who can help manage, code and meaningfully summarize large amounts of qualitative data as well as translators who can help bridge the barriers that arise when trying to transmit and receive information in a variety of languages. In this case there was a team of doctoral students, World Vision employees and iCohere support staff working nonstop during the summit to help keep the virtual and face-to-face process humming. For World Vision, the modest cost of technology and additional consulting support was well worth the trade-offs related to the time and costs associated with arranging numerous global face-to-face meetings. There are also important environmental and sustainability benefits to be realized when individuals do not have to travel to participate in a summit.

The Next Generation of AI Training

Finally, we have seen first hand how technology is expanding the possibilities for AI training through instructor-led online workshops and seminars. For example, in collaboration with David Cooperrider, we have created an online workshop that conveys the foundations of AI to participants around the world. Our inaugural online workshop was launched in the spring of 2005, with 35 participants from five countries. Building on the success of that event, a second workshop ran in the spring of 2006 with 53 participants from seven countries. And most recently, in the spring of 2007, 94 participants from 17 countries participated in the workshop, making it the largest and most globally diverse cohort to date. Through a combination of online participation, offline work and weekly teleconference calls with David, people who otherwise may not have the opportunity to learn the principles and practice of AI are now able to do so from their homes and offices around the globe.

As online learning gains momentum, we expect to see other applications of AI e-learning and e-training emerge. With any highly experiential process, designing learning processes that honor and combine the strengths of face-to-face engagement with the possibilities of remote participation will likely provide the greatest impact for learners and the field itself.

Implications

Reflecting on these success stories and others, David Cooperrider has commented on the potential he sees for technology in AI: 'When I first explored the potentials of bringing Appreciative Inquiry and organizational best practices sharing to online communities in business and non-profits, I soon came to the conclusion the whole thing – of creating a vibrant, alive, relevant, user friendly virtual space – was a mirage. But no more. I have now seen the future of positive organizational learning, collaboration and knowledge sharing. It

is real. It is exciting. And the potentials are vast.'

While we agree whole-heartedly with David's enthusiasm, it is not our intention to dispute the power of AI as a face-to-face process. The cases we have discussed here are intended to ignite our imaginations around what is possible and then extend beyond this to explore the implications for the future models of strength-based collaborative learning and change.

It is also not our intention to tout a particular technology platform or tool. Rather, through our experiences in working to create positive change with organizations, we have seen that it is **not** really about the technology. Just like the flip charts, worksheets and presentations that we use in much of our work, the technology is merely a tool which helps the organization or community to reach its highest dreams. It is important to not let the features of a particular technology drive the change process, but to stay focused on the needs and objectives of the human system when integrating supportive technology. The question is not, 'What technology can we use for this process?' but rather 'What do we want to accomplish in our gatherings, and how can technology support those goals?'

Conclusion

It is undeniable that technology is changing the way we connect with others. The constant advances in online collaborative tools will create possibilities beyond our current dreams of what is possible. New configurations of the whole are feasible in ways never seen before. As a community of practitioners, we need to continue to discuss and reflect on the role of technology in the AI process, sharing best practices and supporting each other as we venture into uncharted technological territories. With the potential that technology adds to the organizational change equation, we believe that AI really is a process that represents, in the words of Jane Watkins and Bernard Mohr, 'change at the speed of imagination!'

Footnote

i http://www.ovationnet.com/index.htm