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Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

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Image courtesy of Griet Brouwen

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Inside this issue

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Introduction: Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry – Stories from a Learning Network

The spark for the theme of this issue came from an Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network on Strengthening Community that the authors initiated and co-facilitated last year. Participants came up with Appreciative Inquiry interventions in many different shapes and forms to foster cohesion and connection in their teams and organisations. Even more, the authors felt the group itself grow into a community. Thus, the idea was born to share some of these experiences with the broader international community of AI practitioners.

In this introductory article we set the scene: first, we describe the tradition of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Learning Networks that we have been hosting since 2008! Then we explain the design of this particular AI Learning Network and reflect on how we sought to host the network as a community in itself. At the end of the article, there is an overview of the stories in this issue, which describe how to strengthen a (sense of) community with Appreciative Inquiry interventions. Most, but not all, are from participants and facilitators of the learning network, illustrating the impact of being part of that network.

An Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network on 'community'

The Belgian–Dutch AI Learning Network is a space where professionals from different organisations and sectors can learn how to facilitate and "boost" change and innovation in their own context, using an AI approach. Each network has a specific theme. In 2025, we chose the topic of "strengthening community", both because we saw that a sense of community is needed in many places – from villages and city neighbourhoods to schools and to businesses – and because AI, as a change paradigm in itself, is very well suited to strengthening communities.

Though people typically join these networks because they want to learn more about AI, the networks are, deliberately, not organised in a traditional training format. Rather, we consider them as learning communities in which participants work on challenges and practices within their own local organisations, learn about theories and tools, and contribute to the learning and

development of others, all at the same time. Thus, the learning networks reflect two of our main ideas when it comes to learning:

1. Learning requires both reflection and theory as well as action, in the sense of practical experiences and deliberate experimentation.

2. Learning is a social process: ultimately, people learn from and with other people. They are each other's sounding board, mirror, role model, sparring partner, critical friend, and so on.

Participants discover the roots and possibilities of AI by learning about the theoretical underpinnings and by experiencing AI activities firsthand.

Each learning network is organised around a year-long programme of activities with a fixed group of participants that meet each other on a regular basis. Appreciative Inquiry is the methodological core: participants discover the roots and possibilities of AI by learning about the theoretical underpinnings and by experiencing AI activities firsthand in the programme meetings. They experiment with AI interventions in their own organisations, share experiences and reflect together on the values, benefits, and possibilities of this way of working.

The network meetings are not isolated interventions; they can be seen as nodes in a continuous learning process. The programme is not a pre-designed plan which we, as facilitators, "deploy": rather, it is something that emerges as a dynamic, interactive system with our participants and guests. Our role is to create and safeguard conditions for learning, such as building a safe but at the same time challenging learning environment, finding the rhythm and structure for an open-ended process, and holding the space for possibilities.

Appreciative Inquiry Learning Networks: An overview

We started organising AI Learning Networks in 2008. Since that first one, we have organised seven more in an open subscription format. The scale of the networks has varied between 40 and 90 participants. This means that almost 400 people have taken part in one. Participants come from a variety of organisations and sectors: large and small, profit and non-for-profit, from both Belgium and Netherlands, from business to education, from healthcare to government.

Every learning network is organised around a central theme. Examples from earlier ones include:

- Fire Works: developing strengths-based teams and organisations'

- Connecting differences into shared futures: powerful multi-stakeholder collaboration

- Positive Education and Positive Organisations

Participants decide to take part in a network because they want to learn about AI, because they have a specific interest in the topic of the learning network in a particular year, or both.

The facilitators are experienced AI practitioners. Though the exact group of facilitators differs a bit for every learning network, the core group of facilitators are the founders: Luc Verheijen, Arno Vansichen, and Griet Bouwen. In 2025, they were joined by Pieterjan van Wijngaarden and Saskia Tjepkema.

Another core partner in the process from its beginning is Professor Ron Fry from the Weatherhead School of Management at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University in the United States. Because the learning network covers the same content as Weatherhead's certificate programme, participants can submit a portfolio of assignments in order to acquire that certificate.

Interested in more about our AI Learning Networks? You can listen to a podcast conversation with Luc Verheijen in the Cooperrider's Center "Inspiring Impacts" series.

The facilitators: (left to right) Griet Bouwen, Luc Verheijen, Saskia Tjepkema, Pieterjan van Wijngaarden and Arno Vansichen

Design of the Strengthening Communities Learning Network

A group of 40 people joined last year's AI Learning Network which focused on strengthening communities, each with their own local challenges and a desire to somehow build or strengthen their community. Participants were working on a wide range of projects to which they wanted to try and apply Appreciative Inquiry principles to strengthen connection and collaboration. Their initiatives spanned contexts as diverse as healthcare organisations, neighbourhoods, schools, social enterprises, businesses, and agricultural value chains.

Forty people joined the 2025 Learning Network

Some of the themes they wanted to work on included: reducing loneliness, improving cooperation within fragmented educational or health care teams, helping a group of schools and neighbourhood partners battle a local shortage of teachers, fostering more inclusive and listening organisational cultures, supporting young professionals in their development, and strengthening collaboration between ecological farmers and their market partners. The projects reflected the wide diversity of contexts in which Appreciative Inquiry can create meaningful and sustainable change.

As a backbone for the learning network, we set up an infrastructure of eight day-long meetings with the whole group, and four half-day meetings in smaller learning groups with an average of eight participants in between. We found that

There were eight full group meetings: The first was a two-day 'mini AI Summit'

They made collages, sketches, an artificial intelligence (the other AI) image, and there was even a little role play to bring their ideas of a strong community to life.

We were joined by Professor Ron Fry from the United States

participants also organised their own smaller meetings informally: they met for coffee, visited each other's workplaces, or met online

The group meetings were set up in such a way that the group could experience the 4D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry first hand, as well as learn about the theoretical underpinnings:

- **Two-day initial workshop, set up as a "mini AI Summit" so that people could experience the flow of an AI process and see how this process could be designed for a larger group.** After a personal check-in and a brief explanation of AI, people engaged in a Discovery and Dream phase around the idea of strengthening community. They started with Discovery interviews in pairs, then in groups of six; they made collages, sketches, an artificial intelligence (the other AI) image, and there was even a little role play to bring their ideas of a strong community to life. We also explored how the "more-than-human-world" could be included in such dialogues, and what that would mean to the quality of the process. Our guest lecturer Marc Craps shared some of his work on ecosystems. Another guest lecturer, Suzanne Verdonschot, shared some of her work on how to stimulate and scale up social innovation without losing the initial "sparkle", by constantly and deliberately broadening the group of people involved. We shared some of the main findings in a "radio talk show format" that was also recorded as a podcast: another way of designing a large-scale conversation while keeping it personal.

- **After this first meetup, participants were ready to experiment in their own local practices. A few weeks later, we reconvened for a three day meeting where we could really dive deeper into both the theoretical and practical underpinnings of AI.** We were joined by Professor Ron Fry, who shared more background on how and why AI works as a dialogical organisational development approach. That helped people reflect on their own experiences: both those from the initial learning network workshop as well as those in their own local experiments: "this is why it worked!". Or: "This is what happened". There was also room to practice with more "craftsmanship" elements, such as formulating a core theme and creating powerful Discovery questions.

Participants also had space for peer-to-peer intervisioning. Of course, we could also explore again how (and why) to include the more-than-human world in our inquiries. And we had a visit from alumni from some of the previous networks who engaged in peer-meetings with the current

All community building stories (including the participants') somehow seemed to include some form of sharing meals, sharing food.

participants. All in all, it was a very rich meeting. Again, participants left with ideas and plans for interventions in their day-to-day practices.

- **A few months later, we reconvened for a day-long meeting on design and rapid prototyping.** Our special guest this time was Rutger van Eijken, an experienced community builder in the city of Breda, whom we interviewed on how he builds communities. Participants were quick to discover the commonalities between AI principles and the lessons that Rutger shared, with one difference: all community building stories (including the participants') somehow seemed to include some form of sharing meals, sharing food. That was an informal lesson learned … After a brief exploration of the Design stage in AI, participants set out for a rapid prototyping exercise supported by an overview of "Nature's design principles", curated by Griet Bouwen, one of the core facilitators of the programme. An exhibition of the prototypes made the power of this way of working tangible for all.

- **The last meeting was a two-day harvest.** Participants were invited to reflect on the progress of their projects and processes, but also on their own progress as practitioners. They shared learnings and deepened them. We were joined by Charlotte Fricker and Roos Polman, local hosts from the House of Active Citizenship in Utrecht, the location for our last meeting. They shared the purpose of their house, namely to facilitate and encourage local citizen initiatives, and gave some examples of their work.

  We engaged in a "pressure cooker" group research on the secret of strengthening communities, with ten experts who dialled in for online exchanges. Of course, the more-than-human-world was also explicitly included in this meeting (see Griet Bouwen's article in this issue to find out how she interwove this thread through the whole network). And we celebrated all the learnings before we said our goodbyes and exchanged addresses to stay in touch.

How to facilitate the network as a learning community

The AI Learning Network in 2025 was extra special because it was a "box within a box" … The community character of the learning network was an extra opportunity for participants to learn firsthand about what communities need in order to grow and thrive. How did we support that aspect of the learning network?

Every group meeting had elements of a micro-adventure.

Doing and being AI

The power of learning from a joint experience is a very important element of the learning networks. Every group meeting had elements of a micro-adventure: experiencing the Discovery and Dream step, meeting a professor from the US, as well as alumni from previous years, engaging in a prototyping session, having a conversation with Nature, being involved in the "pressure cooker" mini research, and so on … This is not only a very powerful way of learning about AI (next to the theory), it also builds the community because participants experience it together.

Place counts

A community is place-bound.

A community is place-bound. The sessions didn't all take place in a single location because people came from all over, but we made sure to create a place every time we met as a group, for example, by having someone from the meeting location share a story of the place and welcome us as a group. But we also did so by creating our own rituals, for example, having a personal check-in question and by sometimes talking about places that were important to the participants, inviting them to bring these other places to the place where we were working that day.

We chose the locations where we worked carefully.

We chose the locations where we worked carefully: the office of Stebo, the social enterprise that was involved with the learning networks from the beginning; Alden Biezen Castle, which had been the location of previous learning networks; a neighbourhood hub in a city that was used by place-maker and community builder Rutger van Eijken, so we could feel the energy of the place he talked about as a guest lecture (we had to cut that day short because the local band came to practice), and the House of Active Citizenship in Utrecht, an initiative located in the local city library to host and support communities. By working in a different location every time, we felt like a group of travellers who were welcomed everywhere by the host of that particular place.

The aim of any AI process is not only to deliver bold new ideas, but also to strengthen the relational fabric between the actors.

Relationship and content walk hand in hand

Appreciative Inquiry, as an example of a dialogical organisation development perspective, places an emphasis on its generative nature. The aim of any AI process is not only to deliver bold new ideas, but also to strengthen the relational fabric between the actors needed to make the change happen. From this emphasis on creating a relational space in order to have a successful action space, we have ourselves said in the past: "relationship first, content second". With that statement in mind we designed and facilitated activities so

It asks for the willingness to meet the other as a fellow human, inspired by generative questions.

people involved could meet each other as human beings, for instance by being involved in extensive introductory activities.

What we learned, however, was the need to constantly interweave attention to the relational dimension as well as the content. They go hand in hand. The challenge as facilitators is to design conversational spaces about the topics at stake in which people are invited to talk as full human beings with each other: from who they are, not what they are … This transcends a mere exchange of opinions, judgements, and expectations. It asks for the willingness to meet the other as a fellow human, inspired by generative questions people ask each other.

A generative question is by nature deeply personal: it involves not only head, but also heart and soul. It invites the exchange of relevant and meaningful personal stories related to the topic at hand. After all, the closest distance between two people is a story. When people experience this quality of seeing and meeting each other, the relational fabric is strengthened by the way people are invited to have a dialogue about the content.

Facilitate as a team

We used each other's strengths in a way that was visible to the group.

As a team of facilitators, we took care to design and host in a way that strengthened the group's sense of community. We were a team, but we also showed our differences. We used each other's strengths in a way that was visible to the group. For example, Arno has a gift for energising the bigger group with lively exercises, sometimes even ice breakers, so he usually undertook those elements of the programme. Pieterjan makes radio content and is a podcast host, so he sometimes used that strength. We also took care to show our curiosity: we were hosts, but also learners. A learning community thrives on the "pull" mechanism: people lead from a deep curiosity, they go foraging for knowledge, as it were, rather than a "push" mechanism, where knowledge is presented by an authority figure. So we also showed our curiosity and were open about things we were experimenting with. Griet very explicitly experimented with ways of including the more-than-human-world, for example. And each of our guests not only came with stories to share but also with questions they wanted to explore.

Bring the outside world in

Every participant and every facilitator is connected to people outside the network.

As a community, a learning network is an open system. It means that every participant and every facilitator is connected to people outside the network, and in a sense brings these relationships into the network. We have discovered that using these large fields of relationships strengthens the feeling of connectedness between those who are part of the network, as if everyone is

Participants committed to a change project in their own work/life context.

We invited alumni for previous learning networks to join in during one of the activities of the current network.

Weaving discoveries together was a feast of learning and connectedness.

willing to add her or his relationships for a brief moment or activity of the learning network.

To give a sense of what we did and how it worked, we have included three examples of how we brought the outside world in. First, participants committed to a change project in their own work/life context. This meant that their stakeholders were involved. The stories participants shared illustrate how extended the learning network actually was. (At the end of one of the previous learning networks, we had asked participants: how many people have been actively involved in your change project? This led to a total of 5,000 (!) people as an extended circle of the learning network.)

A second example is our invitation for alumni of previous learning networks to join in during one of the activities of the current network. Participants are very curious to discover how AI is still part of the mindset and practices of the alumni. It somehow opens up possibilities of what is yet to come. And the alumni loved to touch base with AI and the place where they learned so much about it. Both groups felt connected to a community bigger than the network they were participating in. They could feel part of the whole group of the eight networks.

A third initiative was the "pressure cooker" research activity during the final meeting of this learning network. We invited ten community champions to join us online for an hour: people from our networks of facilitators who we know have inspirational stories about building and strengthening communities. In a first phase, our participants selected questions they would love to ask to these community champions.

After that, we formed small groups so each of the ten guests had an online conversation with a few of the participants. The latter were in charge of an hour-long conversation, using their curiosity and questions. In a third and last step, participants gathered after these conversations, bringing together discoveries and learnings from each of the ten break-out conversations with the community champions. Every participant brought their own laptop and headphones and found a place in the building to dial in for the call. The mutual – and at the same time different – experience of crafting questions, speaking with different community champions, many with similar experiences, and weaving discoveries together was a feast of learning and connectedness.

Stories from the Learning Network in this issue

This issue contains stories from our latest Appreciative Inquiry Learning Network. You will find stories about the impact their learning has had, as told

Small beginnings, curiosity, and timely acts of direction spark growth.

by participants or facilitators who were active in this network. They showcase their interventions as well as the results and impact of their participation in the network. And there are some inspirational stories about strengthening community. There are also a few stories about the long term effect on organisations in which AI is very much rooted in their culture. A quick glance at the stories we brought together in this issue:

Change rarely follows a straight line. *Suzanne Verdonschot*, who was a guest lecturer in our learning network, explores how community building unfolds like a living experiment: small beginnings, curiosity, and timely acts of direction spark growth, deepen engagement, and gradually ignite large-scale movements, even when uncertainty seems unavoidable.

What do you do when a project loses its heart? *Maja Coric* traces a refugee storytelling initiative that regained vitality by confronting uncomfortable truths and centring the voices it serves. Through a non-linear, emergent Appreciative Inquiry process, volunteer engagement was rekindled, narratives empowered, and the unfamiliar became lovable again.

For nearly twenty years, Appreciative Inquiry has been Stebo's quiet pulse. *Luc Verheijen* invites us into this long journey, where AI is not a method to tick off a list, but a living culture that allows improvisation, shared leadership, and continuous renewal from daily practice, reflection, and experimentation.

Picture two vocational education teams brought together, wary of each other's ways. *Maria van Leeuwen* shows how AI transformed ROC Amsterdam's integration process, using summits, daily practices, and shared dreams to nurture trust, build communities, and create tangible benefits for all.

Could Nature teach us to practice Appreciative Inquiry? *Griet Bouwen* explores how bringing plants, animals, and ecosystems into conversations shifts AI from a human-centred to a life-centred practice, which strengthens the ties between people, organisations, and the living world that sustains us all.

Teaching Appreciative Inquiry in an assessment-driven context can feel like threading a needle. *Rosa Helmantel* and *Niels Heetvelt* follow lecturers designing AI-based courses, seeing how experiential learning, alignment with learners' realities, and ongoing reflection turn AI into a mindset, not a curriculum component.

In neighbourhoods where connections are frayed, building bridges can feel impossible. *Lotte de Goeij* and *Marjan Visser* demonstrate how dialogue and community-focused inquiry in The Hague's Laak district wove schools,

organisations, and stakeholders into durable partnerships, working on the very acute challenge of a local shortage of teachers.

Small habits, big impact. At Group Talent, *Griet Bouwen* shows how everyday micro-practices – playful check-ins, reflective storytelling, and attentive dialogue – allow nearly 1,000 employees to learn, collaborate, and innovate. Here, organisational vitality grows not from grand strategies, but from the quality of relationships.

Volunteer shortages can feel like an impossible puzzle. *Jeroen Hellings*, *Ilse Boersma*, and *Saskia Tjepkema* describe how Appreciative Inquiry helped both professional actors and volunteers in a local municipality uncover what already works, strengthen networks, and take small, practical steps. The result: scattered efforts have developed into a community capable of sustaining meaningful local initiatives.

In the high-stakes world of medical specialist training, small shifts in perspective can change everything. *Berry Nijveld* and *Frederica Jousma* show how using Appreciative Inquiry at Erasmus MC moved the focus from problem-solving to exploring strengths and connection. Through interviews, summits, and strategic integration, residents became drivers of innovation, and educators co-created future-oriented programmes with shared ownership, dialogue, and interprofessional collaboration.

Sometimes what transforms a team is not a method, but a presence. *Niels Heetvelt* reflects on a workshop on Appreciative Presence facilitated by David Shaked and Hanneke Laarakker. By cultivating attentive, inclusive, and appreciative ways of being, he explores how transformation emerges in teams, organisations, and personal relationships alike.

All in all, a varied collection of stories, from very different types of communities in very different contexts. We hope you enjoy them and find ideas to strengthen your own community, with either smaller or bigger Appreciative Inquiry-inspired interventions.

Luc Verheijen and Saskia Tjepkema
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How can I help with volunteer shortages? Read about how one community found a solution on page 56.

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Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company is an international group of consultants, coaches and facilitators with a passion for learning and development. From their bases in The Netherlands, Belgium, South Africa and Germany they support individuals, organizations and communities around the world to strive for solutions that build individual growth, sustainable organizational development, and social change. They carry The Learning Company as their name because:

- Learning is at the heart of what they do: they aim to create and facilitate powerful learning processes.

- The professionals from Kessels & Smit want to be good company to each other and to people they work with: they believe the best solutions are developed in partnerships.

- They strive to be a learning organization, constantly renewing their work processes, structures and approaches. The company is their "laboratory", where they experiment and find answers for learning and development and organizational questions.

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