February 2026
Volume 28 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0
dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-67-0

AI Practitioner
International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry

Strengthening Community with Appreciative Inquiry: Stories From a Learning Network

Edited by
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Image courtesy of Griet Brouwen

Co-publishers

The David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry and Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company

AI Practitioner.com

February 2026
Volume 28 Number 1

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0
dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-67-0-7

AI Practitioner

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What Teachers Teach Us About Teaching Appreciative Inquiry

The most powerful way to pass on Appreciative Inquiry is to practise it while teaching it. This case shows that even in an assessment-driven educational context, Appreciative Inquiry can be passed on by trusting experiential learning, normalising struggle, and aligning inquiry with learners' realities. The enduring impact appeared after the process ended: lecturers kept reflecting, writing appreciatively, and learning. The inquiry had truly become theirs.

It is November 2025, and we are on our way to an appointment when an unexpected email appears in our inbox. "Lessons learned from Appreciative Inquiry", reads the subject line. We immediately recognise the sender: a lecturer from a university of applied sciences in the Netherlands we worked with before summer. Our eyes fall on the first sentence: "I suddenly thought: maybe Rosa and Niels would like to know how the classes on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) have gone."

We are touched that a lecturer we worked with months ago has now taken the initiative to share in such detail the ups and downs of their learning process. What moves us as well is the writing style: carefully and clearly appreciative. As individuals who consider themselves to be still developing in the field of AI, our reaction is, "This is remarkable if you have only recently been introduced to AI". But also, "This seems to reflect what we discovered as a core insight from a recent successful Appreciative Inquiry process: when the researcher leaves, the participants continue learning themselves".

A process of puzzling out: Passing on AI expertise as an AI practitioner in a challenging context

Let's rewind to December 2024, when this university of applied sciences first approached us to think about designing their education programme on Appreciative Inquiry. This concerned the Human Resources Management (HRM) programme, where students are trained to become HR professionals. The lecturers wanted to include Appreciative Inquiry as a change perspective in

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0

the new curriculum. Since the lecturers themselves had never worked with AI before, nor were they trained in it, they looked for expertise from outside.

How do you pass something on while you are still learning about it yourself?

When we received the request, we were participants in the middle of an AI Learning Network, discovering the theory and practices of Appreciative Inquiry ourselves. That made the question even more intriguing: what an opportunity for us to further explore our understanding of AI by working on the question "How could you design an educational programme to teach Appreciative Inquiry?"

We decided to seize the assignment with both hands. At the same time, the request also evoked some discomfort: how do you pass something on while you are still learning about it yourself? How do you do that in the context of education that, as we understand it, is not designed according to AI principles? And what about the target group of students that is not at all used to education and assessment from an AI perspective?

It certainly became a challenging and interesting process of "puzzling it out". But the lecturer's later email also made us aware of the impact the process can continue to have. It sparked the idea that reflecting on the puzzling process is actually worthwhile, several months later.

What did we learn about passing AI on in our role of AI practitioner to lecturers, students, and perhaps to many others? We decided to organise this reflection in an AI way as well: not about, but together with, the lecturers. How do they look back on the process?

Designing AI education ... through an AI process

Passing on theory and practices of AI to lecturers for education about AI: we hardly know any other way than to weave AI into the design process itself. We started the design process with bringing all of the lecturers of the HRM programme together.

Lecturers practised asking appreciative questions amongst themselves.

Lecturers practised asking appreciative questions themselves, shared their "big bang" moment – the moment when the passion for their job started – in an appreciative interview.

It became a morning in which the effect of these first experiences with design questions prompted by Appreciative Inquiry, such as, "What might this AI perspective add to our education programme? How does it relate to other content and ways of thinking and working that we offer?"

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After the joint kick-off and an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry, we stepped into designing different parts of the programme, such as the leadership module. We started designing together with the group of lecturers who teach the module. We developed initial ideas and a rough line of reasoning for how to weave AI into the classes.

A joint process of figuring out and stepping into all the questions emerged.

It felt like a joint process of figuring out and stepping into all the questions that emerged. For instance: what do we want students to learn about AI, and at which stage of their studies? How do the classes relate to one another, and how can we ensure that the level is gradually built up? What are the actual steps in learning about AI?

Once we had established the overall line together, the detailed design of the classes could begin. If the first class was to be about the difference between problem thinking and AI-based working, what do we want students to take away? And how do we best convey that? It was a process of "building the bridge while walking over it".

During the joint design process, we encountered several issues that puzzled both the lecturers and us. When the pilot classes were actually taught for the first time, those exact issues resurfaced. We describe these puzzles below and explore what we learned from them: which principles help in passing on AI.

Three puzzles in passing on Appreciative Inquiry

Puzzle 1 How do you pass something on while you are still learning it yourself?

One of the challenges both the lecturers and we as co-designers encountered was that they were asked to design and ultimately teach classes on a topic they were still learning about themselves.

'I realised my lack of skill and understanding related to something I was supposed to teach.'
Lecturer

One lecturer said, "At a certain point, I was really consciously incompetent: I realised my lack of skill and understanding related to something I was supposed to teach." When we later asked the lecturers what had helped them combine their own learning about AI with teaching it, several important lessons emerged.

Lecturers indicated that it helped them greatly that, during the first morning when they learned in an experiential way about AI together, we highlighted examples of AI stories in our work as consultants. Hearing these examples made the methodology and perspective of AI truly come alive. The stories added meaning to their own experiences from our workshop.

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0

In preparation for the student classes, he had started practising AI with a colleague.

One lecturer shared that, in preparation for the student classes, he had started practising AI with a colleague. They did not know each other very well and decided to engage in a conversation using appreciative questions. It not only helped them get to know each other better, the value of the conversation lay primarily in practising AI themselves, feeling how it works and what it asks of you, which was different from what they were used to.

Another lecturer noted that it helped greatly to normalise during the classes that both lecturers and students sometimes fall back into problem thinking. "It is what we are so accustomed to, and therefore it is self-evident that the different kind of thinking AI requires does not immediately become the new norm."

Puzzle 2 How do you design AI education that is meaningful for young adults?

How do you design meaningful AI education for young adults?

The educational programme we developed together is aimed for students around 20 years old. One of the major design questions was, therefore: how do you design meaningful AI education for young adults?

In this case, the students had not yet completed an internship, so their experience in the professional world was limited. In the design, we chose to connect as much as possible to the students' frame of reference. One example: having them practice an appreciative interview applied to a situation they had encountered in their part-time job, their education, their family lives, or their sport.

Although this ensured that students had experiences to draw on, lecturers also noticed some students struggled during the classes. Students tend to be strongly focused on course assessment and what will be required of them to get good grades. Therefore they want assignments to prepare them as much as possible for the final assessment.

The puzzle we encountered in the design phase thus continued to surface during the early classes as well. How do you design meaningful AI education for students who have a limited frame of reference when it comes to work contexts and for whom preparation for assessment is paramount?

Once the classes had been designed, a new question arose.

What gradually became clear in working with this puzzle was that designing meaningful AI education for young adults is not a one-time design choice, but an ongoing search that requires staying closely attuned to the learners' lived realities. What resonates with students cannot be fully predicted beforehand, especially in a context where their frame of reference is still developing.

A working element we discovered is to treat the alignment with students' worlds as a co-creative design task rather than a fixed assumption. Instead of

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0

designing *for* students, involving them in reflecting on what feels meaningful, relevant, and challenging helps to keep the education process alive.

Puzzle 3 How do you assess something that, in essence, is related to mindset, relationship, and process?

Once the classes had been designed, a new question arose: how do we assess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that belong to AI? Because even though formative assessment may not seem to fit naturally with AI, our educational system is still structured around assessment. After much deliberation, we ultimately chose a number of different forms of evaluation, such as a portfolio and a conversation with a lecturer in the role of manager.

In doing so, we encountered several challenges. For example, after the first classes, lecturers indicated that students nowadays make easy use of programmes such ChatGPT, so much so that portfolios quickly lose their authenticity.

And for the conversation with the lecturer in the role of manager, the question was: how do you then create an assessment form for a set of skills and an attitude that revolves around mindset, relationship, and process?

Lecturers had the experience that assessing AI is not merely a technical question of finding the right form, but a fundamentally new exploration of their own role as educators.

In addressing this puzzle, lecturers had the experience that assessing AI is not merely a technical question of finding the right form, but a fundamentally new exploration of their own role as educators. Accustomed to assessing predefined outcomes and products, they now found themselves navigating uncertainty, experimenting with alternative forms of assessment and questioning what it actually means to "see" learning when it concerns mindset, relationship, and process.

What proved essential was embracing assessment as a learning process for lecturers themselves. Through ongoing investigative conversations, trying out different assessment formats, reflecting on what works and what does not, and being willing to adapt along the way, assessment gradually becomes more aligned with the principles of AI. Rather than searching for a perfect assessment system, lecturers need to approach assessment appreciatively: as something that evolves through inquiry, dialogue, and continuous adjustment within the constraints of the existing educational system.

What helps: Principles for passing on AI

From the process of designing a course for higher-education students, we can distil a number of principles for passing on AI:

ISBN 978-1-907549-67-0

1. It helps to "do" AI already in the design process itself by building on the energy of lecturers, giving them space for inquiry and experimentation, and trusting the process.

2. You learn AI by experiencing it. In an (educational) design, it therefore pays to build in as many experiential moments as possible.

3. It is important to align these learning experiences as much as possible with the reality and frame of reference of the learner.

You learn AI by experiencing it.

4. It helps to normalise the concept that AI requires a different way of thinking and looking, and that learners may experience moments of relapse. That is part of the process.

What we have added to our AI practitioner backpacks

Shaping meaningful experiences is the art of educational design.

For us as AI practitioners, building a course about AI for students also held important lessons. We already knew the importance of experience in the context of learning about AI; this has become even more clear to us, and is especially true for students, who do not yet have extensive work experience, who recognise the focus on problems less from a work context. Shaping meaningful experiences is the art of educational design. It is a prerequisite for truly internalising the way of working and the perspective of AI.

To align the experiences as closely as possible with the students' lived world, a next step in the design cycle could be to invite students who have taken the first classes to think along with the designers about how to make the assignments even more fitting.

Finally, we learned that it takes courage to develop a new appreciative mindset and to experiment with how AI can coexist with the formal education system in a context that is more assessment-driven.

And so this story ends where it began: with a lecturer who continued to learn, reflect, and share. Perhaps that is the most beautiful proof that AI has truly been passed on – not because the curriculum was changed, but because the thinking kept moving.

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