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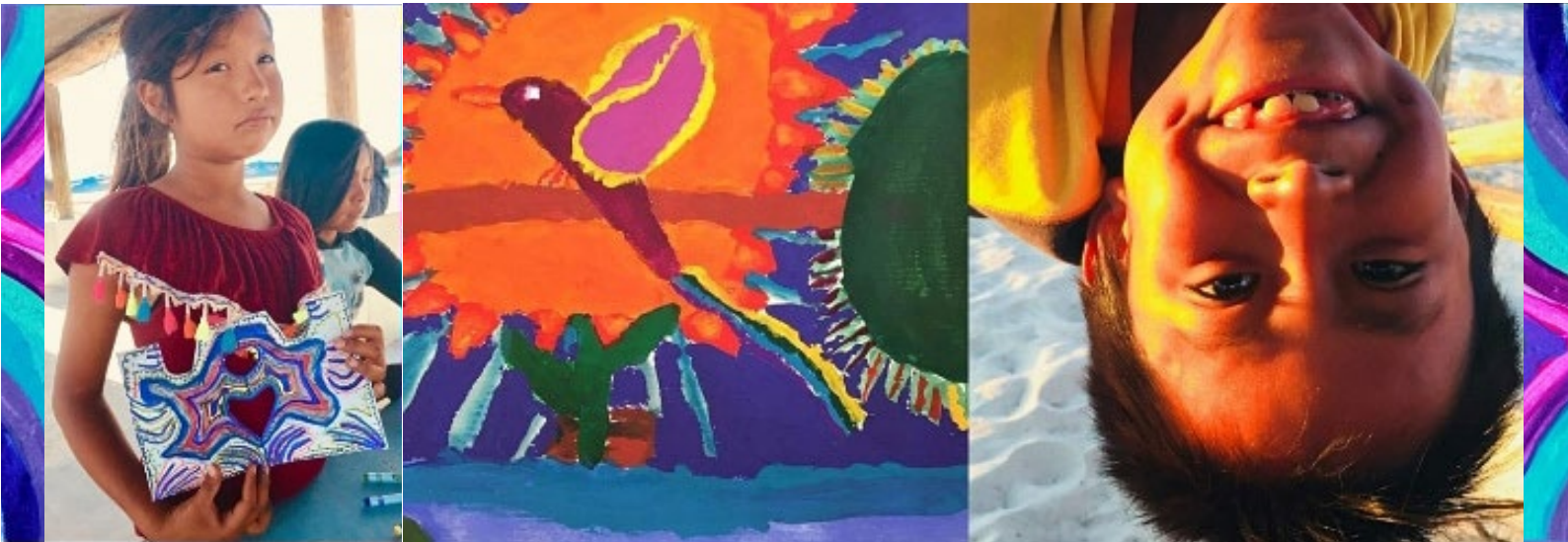
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# AI Practitioner

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## Desarrollando Equipos Appreciativos: Una Perspectiva Latinoamericana Developing Appreciative Teams: A Latin American Perspective

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## Feature Choice

# The Next Step

**In this article, the author argues that you never do action research on your own: you need all stakeholders to be there with you. The exchange of ideas through sharing stories is more about an exchange of gifts. Through these gifts, we spread knowledge and become aware of the values through questioning what is important to us: who are we, what do we want and what do we need to do to achieve our dreams.**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is, for me, a way to create transformation by doing action research. The research is done in all areas of life and the effects are visible. I do research on three levels: head, heart and *hara* (the centre point of the body), principles which I also connect with my practice of the Japanese martial art of Aikido.

As with all good action research, you never do it on your own: you need all stakeholders to be there with you. The exchange of ideas through sharing stories is more about an exchange of gifts. Through these gifts, we spread knowledge. Being in an action research gives all stakeholders opportunity for growth. This opportunity for growth is your journey of transformation. By accepting the gifts, we co-create knowledge. The next step is to discover how you combine the work with daily practices that flow from the action research process. In social constructionism, we learn about the importance of sharing stories. Through AI, people become aware of their individual values by questioning what is important to them. The values construct who you are, what you want to be and what you need to do to create that dream.

Appreciative Inquiry sees experiments as part of the process of knowledge creation. The experiments can be a description of our journey of transformation. Sometimes we need just one word to shift direction.

In the first step of the AI process (Discover), you create a base for the transformation by sharing stories of success. The second step (Dream) is there to allow stakeholders to express their dreams, their desires. This dream or vision

of the future is the answer to what might happen with some imagination. It is about the stakeholders' shared vision. In the third step (Design) we come up with plans, together, for the next steps. We make choices to fulfil our dreams. The last step (Deliver) is an iterative process, based on the experiments we make.

*It became more and more clear that what I wanted to look for were the next steps.*

### Relationships in academic environments

When first asked to write an article for the AIP, I wanted to reflect critically on the traditional narratives of supervisor–student relationships in academic environments, which usually tend to focus on hierarchies, individual characteristics and traits that have been prioritized and made essential. But along the way it became more and more clear that what I wanted to look for were the next steps. With the world on fire through the pandemic, climate crisis and the call for transformation that I keep hearing, I realised it was time to talk about the next step that will help find the positive core in all that is happening. In the process, you discover how you are combining your work with your daily practice on your own journey of transformation.

### Supervising students

Supervising students during their work to obtain either a Bachelor or Masters' grade is often done by giving them the required structure and guiding them through literature review and finding a suitable research method to fit their research question. Many students complain about lack of guidance and feel insecure during the process of research. They feel that everything they learned in the past is not enough.

*'You are co-creating knowledge, and not just transmitting it.'*  
Celiane Camargo-Borges

To relate in a meaningful way with students as a supervisor, my friend Celiane Camargo-Borges said in conversation that “you are co-creating knowledge, and not just transmitting it. The way you talk about the dissertation, methodological decisions and ask curious questions, you help the new narratives to emerge. Our ways of relating will shape the contents of the dissertation; the methods, the analysis and conclusions.”

Using this way of supervising, we move away from education as content transfer from books to the student's head to education where learning is a relational experience, in a local context. In my first meeting with a new student I'm intrigued by who they are, what their story is. I ask them to share stories of success in any part of their life. That way I help them see where their strengths are. Sometimes these strengths are hidden by frustration or fear. And then one word can help them shift to having more freedom in their head. Often, though,

*Often, it is not through the head that I work.*

it is not through the head that I work. I ask them about the other things they do, besides sitting at the computer. They talk to me about meeting friends, playing sports. In sports they learn through the body (*hara*). Or they might be gifted chefs who design fantastic menus in their home kitchens. In this type of hobby they learn through the heart.

Just imagine what would happen if we stop learning only with the head, but included heart and body in the process as well? If we focus on imagination, creating future literacy, we start from the assumption that the future does not yet exist. That it can only be imagined. And humans have this ability to imagine. As a result, humans are able to learn to imagine the future from a basis of different reasons and in different ways. Learning through head, heart and body might be liberating and potentially life changing for the students.

### Unconditionally positive questions

The unconditionally positive questions we use in AI have been a guide for me in all areas of my life.

The questions that could help the student with imagining the future together with the stakeholders are so important in starting to create new narratives within the group involved in the research. In AI, positive questions start by asking about a time when you were successful in the area of choice. This is followed by a question on how you accomplished that success and then a question about who was involved in the successful process (Whitney, et al. 2005).

*The questions often help people to go a bit deeper and discover the question behind the question.*

Another tool that a supervisor can use to help the student come up with more curious questions is the *Coaching Cubes* developed by Sarah Lewis (2021). The cubes have six colours; each explores, identifies, creates shifts, illuminates ideas, creates movement or clarifies first steps. The questions often help people to go a bit deeper and discover the question behind the question.

### Applying AI principles

The authors of Appreciative Coaching provide questions structured around the different AI principles. There are questions that help the student see his/her past successes and abilities which are linked to the constructionist principle. The positive principle demonstrates positive effects by either the supervisor or the student. By using the simultaneity principle, the supervisor may prompt the student to think in new ways. This will help the student to change his/her language from negative to positive. The poetic principle shows how a supervisor

*'What is important to you  
in this project?'*

can reframe the neutral or negative story, whether it is that of a student, or stakeholders in an organization. The anticipatory principle can be used to help imagine what the future might be like (Orem, Binkert and Clancy 2007).

When students start working on their (action) research, I ask them questions like: "How do you look at the theme you're researching?" "What is important to you in this project?", "When will the stakeholders be happy?"

And when they tell me things I don't understand, I ask them if they can tell me more about it, or whether they can help me understand their point of view (Masselink, et al. 2020).

### Stories of success

One of "my" students came to me after trying several times to deliver a successful plan of action for her Bachelor thesis. She'd had almost no feedback from her university and she was getting more and more insecure. In our first meeting we talked about the early years of her education and what classes she really liked. And we talked about the work she was doing at a grocery shop. She was the manager of the people behind the cash register. She liked her job. I asked her what she like most.

*She enjoyed watching them  
grow into their roles and  
loved helping them amplifying  
their strengths.*

It turned out that she was becoming more and more a coach to those working for her. She enjoyed watching them grow into their roles and loved helping them amplifying their strengths. We then talked about her research project. The problem she was trying to solve had to do with the fact that people working at her shop frequently called in sick, especially during the first lockdown, in 2020, for the pandemic. The people told her they were afraid of catching Covid and often had to talk to customers about keeping their distance and use the hand wash that was provided to clean the shopping carts.

I told her about AI and how we do action research by including as many stakeholders as possible. She confirmed that while preparing for her research she had planned to send out a survey to the people that were ill or had been calling in sick often. We started talking about how big that group was (not so big, she confirmed). We talked about the other group, the people who were there, working. We talked about how she works with her people and then looked at the purpose of a survey. She agreed that interviews would be better suited to her style. We talked some more and I told her about "getting the whole system in one room". We made another appointment to talk in a few days.



*She said she'd changed her research plan to include all employees in the shop.*

I'd given her some articles to read on action research and AI. In the next meeting she said she'd changed her research plan to include all employees in the shop, and that she would do interviews and group sessions. During the process she learned more about action research and together we found ways of working with her university's requirements while still being able to do what she thought was the best way forward. After half a year she graduated and has started a new job as a job coach.

*Living in the moment is the most important thing when practising Aikido.*

## Aikido

More than 20 years ago I started to practise Aikido, a Japanese martial arts developed by O'Sensei Morihei Ueshiba. One of Aikido's central aspects is the concept of *ki* (energy). The Chinese call it *chi*, Indian yogis speak of *prana* and the Sioux word is *wakan*. In all the literature, the journey O'Sensei made is discussed: it becomes clear that living in the moment is the most important thing when practising Aikido. When being in the moment, one can "easily" feel what the body is revealing. The head (the ego) doesn't help ... And this, for me, is one of

Through performing the techniques and experimenting different options, I learn about who I am and who my partner is.



the bigger lessons that Aikido teaches me. My ego is very loud. Most egos are.

The journey of transformation is to do experimental research (through head, heart and body) on who you are, who you want to be, and how you can be you. This journey through Aikido means that you work on being in the here-and-now, try to shut your ego up, and be consistent in your practice. So: show up on time, be full of energy, be awake, be in the now, and enjoy. The practice of Aikido has shown me how to learn with head, heart and body. In Aikido we talk about *hara* being the center of your body, a point located at your navel.

During the early days of the pandemic, in the spring of 2020, my Aikido teacher confirmed that it was time to start training for my third Dan (black belt). Besides the normal training time, when preparing for a Dan grade you start working on

*My teacher found ways for us to keep working on our development.*

specific personal development issues. Each Dan has its own pointers, and for the third Dan you need to be decisive. You need to discover who you are and create and keep your own space. Because of the pandemic we were not allowed to train in the dojo.

My teacher found ways for us to keep working on our development, training outside in Amsterdam parks while training with the boken (a wooden sword). With this form (it is more like a kata) you can keep distance and we were outside. In early summer of 2021, we were allowed to go back to our “normal” dojo training. In July we had our summer school. I was able to do my exam. I’m now a proud third Dan Aikido-ka.

When performing Aikido techniques there is also room for asking unconditionally positive questions. Imagine what would happen if the teacher only pays attention to what goes wrong in your practice. You would probably stop fairly quickly, not feeling too great about yourself. But what will help is asking the unconditionally positive questions. When practising Aikido techniques we partner up and learn together. We learn through our bodies, but head and heart are also involved.

*Who do you want to be?*

*How do you want to be?*

*What behaviour will help you get there?*

The questions asked of us or our partner(s) are designed to discover the best of “what is” through discovering high-point stories and experiences. Through these stories we discover our strengths. The strengths can be in the head (I’m able to look at a technique and can immediately copy it), the heart (I’m fully in the here and now and can feel what intentions my partner has), or the hara (I’m able to stand low and put all my weight in the lower part of my body, so that I can connect with my hara to my partner, and make the practice of benefit to both of us). The unconditionally positive questions could be: “who do you want to be”, “how do you want to be”, and “what behaviour will help you get there”?

## Stories of success

During the process of attaining my third Dan in Aikido I have also been assisting my teacher at a sports club for people who need extra attention. One of the new students was a young girl from Russia, twelve years old. During the classes she tried to find the boundaries. No biting, no dirty fighting. One day she pushed me hard and I briefly thought of hitting back. The week after, my teacher was not able to make it on time, so he asked me to take the class. When I entered the dojo, the girl was the only student there. In a split second I had to make a decision. I went for “girl power” as the theme for the lesson. I started with the story of how female warriors in Japan had their own role to play beside the samurai warriors. These women were called *ona-bu-geisha*. They used their own strengths and created a place amongst the ranks of the warriors.

*My daily practice of Aikido gives me tools to work as a coach for students.*

During the class, I explained how women can use the fact that they are not as strong as but more flexible than most men. During the class our relationship changed. Now we're having fun together.

### The next step through Aikido

My daily practice of Aikido gives me tools to work as a coach for students. It wouldn't work for me if my practice was "only" coaching sports. Running or rowing would not do the work. What makes Aikido so important for me on my journey of transformation has to do with how I learn through head, heart and hara, while practicing this martial art.

I've noticed that working with students along side my Aikido practice gives me "room" to experiment. Through talking to the students about what their successes are, I discover who they are. This is the same as when I'm practising Aikido with a partner in the dojo. Through performing the techniques and experimenting different options, I learn about who I am and who my partner is.

I've realized that this way of working together is also possible in online working. Before the pandemic, I always thought I needed to be close to my students in order to sense who they were. But by asking positive questions, online working fits well with this coaching work.

Through the combination of coaching and my daily practice I've learned that one of the most important strengths for me is curiosity. At first I thought it would all be about being able to change. But now I realize that being curious is the first step. Or rather, the next step.

I'd like to invite you to share your story about your journey to transformation. And tell me how you combine your work with daily practices.





## Inspiration

Here are some sources of inspiration in my own journey of transformation.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)