

November 2021

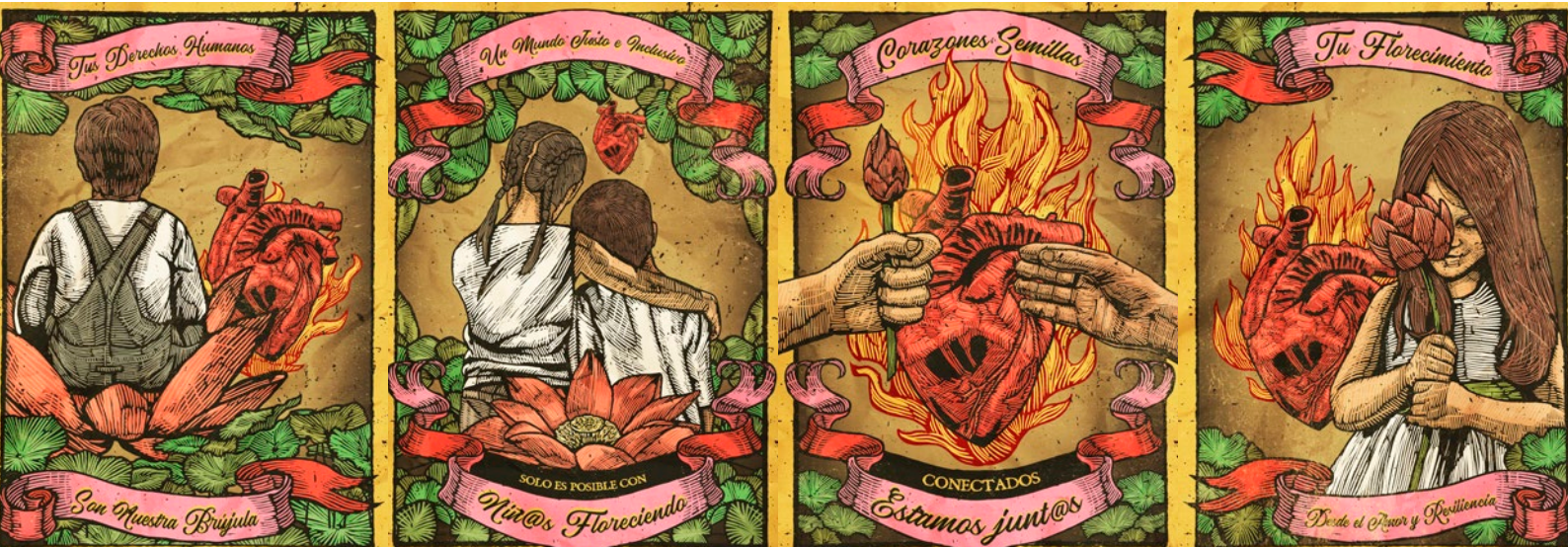
Volume 23 Number 4

ISBN 978-1-907549-49-6

 [dx.doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-49-6](https://doi.org/10.12781/978-1-907549-49-6)

AI Practitioner

International Journal of Appreciative Inquiry



Appreciative Inquiry and Virtual Technology: An Improbable Pair for Accelerating the Wholeness Principle

Edited by

Tanya Cruz Teller and Sherri Sutton

Editorial support

Joep. C. de Jong

Co-publishers

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

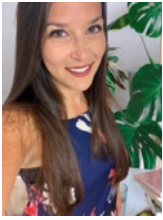
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Melissa Robaina

Melissa Robaina, MBA is the Chief Operations Officer for The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, an international Appreciative Inquiry certification organization. Melissa collaborates with numerous subject matter experts around the world to research, organize, develop, and facilitate content that invites discussion, nurtures creativity, and encourages inclusivity.

Contact: Melissa@CenterForAppreciativeInquiry.net
CenterForAppreciativeInquiry.net



Kathy Becker

Kathy Becker is the CEO of The Center for Appreciative Inquiry. She leads a global network of change agents focused on our shared vision to advance equality, equity, social justice and environmental justice one inquiry at a time.

Contact: Kathy@CenterForAppreciativeInquiry.net



Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair

Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell, co-presidents of Cockell McArthur-Blair Consulting, specialize in designing strategies to surface the wisdom of individuals, groups and organizations to build positive futures. They are the co-authors of *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey through Hope, Despair, and Forgiveness* (2018) and *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force* (2nd ed., 2020) and many articles on leadership and AI. They bring to this issue a lifelong passion for and study of leadership and resilience.

Contact: joan@cockellmcarthur-blair.com; jeanie@cockellmcarthur-blair.com
cockellmcarthur-blair.com



Leeann Waddington

Leeann Waddington works in the post-secondary context and has a background in instruction, curriculum design and leadership in healthcare and education. An AI facilitator and Trainer and co-founder of Appreciative Learning Solutions, she is passionate about designing learning environments that support learners to be their best.

Contact: leeann.waddington@outlook.com

Embodying Wholeness in Virtual Collaborations

How do you take a process that is traditionally delivered in-person and successfully move it online? By utilizing the strengths, knowledge, and experience of its Core Team. This online delivery deepened the learning and laid the foundation for an ongoing online learning community.



Appreciative Inquiry has traditionally been conducted in-person. The idea of facilitating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in virtual spaces has often been met with reservation and hesitancy. Bringing diverse groups of people together to stimulate creativity and build collective capacity, also known as the Wholeness principle, is what makes Appreciative Inquiry so powerful and successful in creating positive change. Many practitioners have believed that the high levels of engagement, inclusiveness and power of AI would be lost if delivered online. As a result, most have continued to deliver AI services in-person, including [The Center for Appreciative Inquiry](http://TheCenterforAppreciativeInquiry.com) (CAI).

The arrival of Covid-19, however, changed everything. Countries around the world began to impose social distancing and restrictions on group gatherings that altered how we work, interact, and learn from one another. CAI realized it needed to quickly modify how it operated or face the possibility of closing. We made the decision to begin to transform our in-person certification programs into a virtual

space, starting with our flagship program, the [Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training](#) (AIFT).



Prior to the pandemic, many AI practitioners operated independently of one another. Covid provided us the unique opportunity to come together to learn, collaborate and innovate. By utilizing our individual and collective strengths, we successfully designed and delivered exceptional online learning experiences for our AIFT participants and trainers. A highlight from this experience has been the opportunity for me to strengthen new and existing relationships with colleagues and clients – all of which were forged in the spirit, philosophy and principles of Appreciative Inquiry.

Melissa Robaina, COO for The Center for Appreciative Inquiry

Assembling a core team



As the world continues to operate in digital spaces, what opportunities does this new working environment offer and how can we leverage technology to revolutionize how AI is designed, taught and facilitated? To explore these questions further, CAI formulated a core team composed of seasoned AI practitioners, AIFT trainers, instructional designers and technical support. The creative capacity of this diverse group enabled CAI to pool its collective experience, understanding and expertise to generate new opportunities for Appreciative Inquiry, learning, engagement and community.

The quote, “If it’s about me, don’t do it without me” really resonates with me. In building the approach and content for the vAIFT, we lived this! All the trainers were meaningfully engaged in every step of development and we each applied our experience and understanding of our trainees’ needs to this creative process. The vAIFT was so much richer because we applied the wholeness principle.

Rolene Pryor, vAIFT trainer and core team member

CAI kicked off its first core team meeting by inquiring into their best online learning experience. From the stories shared, the core team identified several key elements and features that contributed to the best online learning experience for the group. Using this information, the core team sought tools and services that would enable them to create the best online learning experience for participants that was interactive, experiential, that invited dialogue and nurtured community. As pieces of the technological puzzle came together, the dynamics and synergy amongst the core team shone bright as members volunteered for tasks based on their individual strengths.

We worked together as a powerful core team to amplify our strengths, wander into each other's areas with new and innovative ideas, and honor the power of feedback from the entire team of trainers.

Melissa Robaina and Kathy Becker held the responsibility for the overall creation and technical logistics of the new course and online portal; Joan McArthur-Blair and Jeanie Cockell took on the task of mapping out the new virtual Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Training (vAIFT) and creating the overall design of synchronous and asynchronous learning; Leeann Waddington created the learning management system and had a colleague create slides for both the asynchronous (people engage individually at whatever time works for them) and synchronous (people engage together at the same time) sections; Cheri Torres created videos for some of the asynchronous sections.

We worked together as a powerful core team to amplify our strengths, wander into each other's areas with new and innovative ideas, and honor the power of feedback from the entire team of trainers. The process was challenging, fun, creative, dynamic and resulted in a course that participants loved.

The community of AI facilitators are very generous, open to sharing ideas and best practices and supporting each other from long before the Covid-19 pandemic. Going virtual with our AIFTs, one of the most rewarding parts of the experience was the incredible sharing and supporting that happened among the group of AIFT trainers, who quickly came together to lend their individual strengths to creating online resources on our LearnDash platform, converting in-person activities into virtual activities, and preparing each other for virtual facilitation.

Lane Glenn, vAIFT trainer and core team member

vAIFT development

AI has many moving parts. During the construction of the vAIFT, great thought and care was given to each aspect of the course. Designing and delivering the vAIFT using a hybrid learning model enabled CAI to capitalize on the benefits of synchronous and asynchronous learning. The redesign was done with the primary objective of taking the best of our previous face-to-face delivery and making it even better.

The AIFT course was transformed into vAIFT synchronous and asynchronous modules with various subtopics to support participant learning in the course. To bring the new course to life we created and redesigned: module outlines; slides; course content; videos and related materials.

As an AIFT trainer, it was an honor to be invited to collaborate on the development of an online AIFT training. Many of us offered ideas and

I was delighted to be invited to create a series of videos on the research that supports the efficacy of AI.

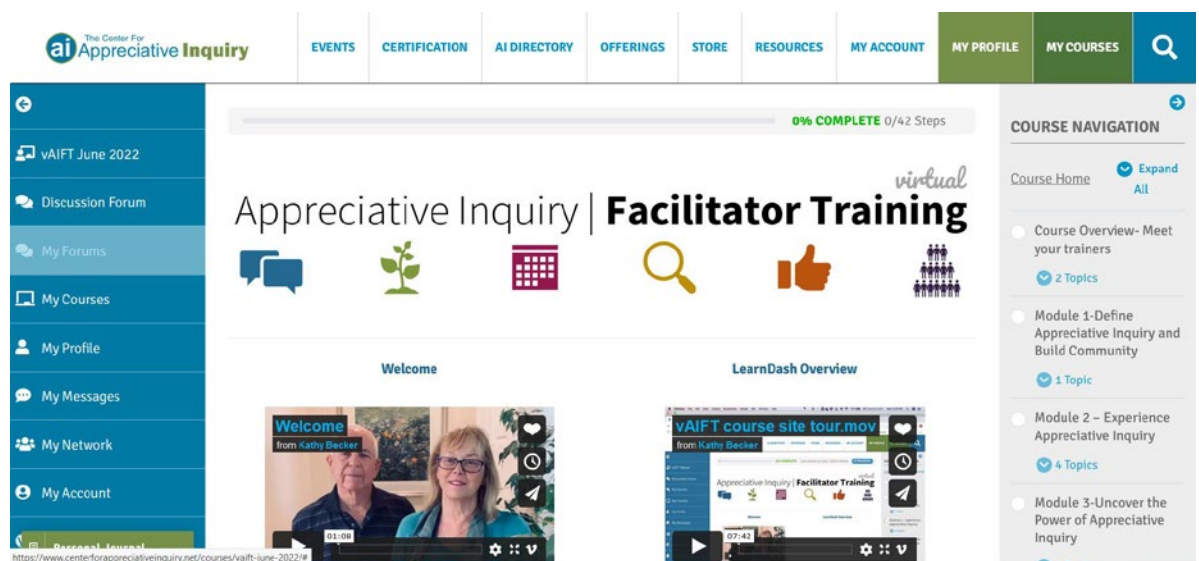
Cheri Torres

the resulting design takes advantage of individual asynchronous work plus synchronous live sessions. I was delighted to be invited to create a series of videos on the research that supports the efficacy of AI – the neuroscience, positive psychology and Cooperrider’s original positive image/positive action study. This is one of my favorite topics when teaching AI and I believe it plays to my strengths in how I might best support the vAIFT.

Cheri Torres, vAIFT trainer and core team member

Synchronous sessions were planned with two purposes in mind: establishment of community relationships and building powerful experiential learning in community. In our work, we sought to rise to the challenge of creating a highly interactive, holistic and engaging space. The content delivered in these sessions focused on the key facilitator principles and practices in AI and dovetailed with the asynchronous learning. In the synchronous sessions, particular attention was paid to the development of a community of learning – through agreement setting; high engagement sessions; AI content and exercises; paired and small group work and reflection. Supporting slides were designed to align with effective multimedia design principles. Particular attention was paid to ensure, wherever possible, the images on these slides served as memory triggers for the concept being discussed and were visually pleasing.

This project was incredibly rewarding; as an educational developer, learning and curriculum design are part of my core work. Doing so from an appreciative perspective, with such care and attention to the experiences of the participants, was energizing. I believe that effective design allows us to maximize the affordances of digital spaces and



am thrilled that the facilitators and participants are having such

The opportunities to come together are truly endless if we use all the tools available to facilitate that connection.

Leeann Waddington

wonderful experiences learning together and creating a community that breaks down barriers related to time, space and geography. The opportunities to come together are truly endless if we use all the tools available to facilitate that connection.

Leeann Waddington, vAIFT trainer and core team member



The Learndash system was selected as the asynchronous learning management system for its seamless integration with the Center's current WordPress installation. The user interface was simple and an overview video of the site was provided to orient the learners. Icons were used as visual prompts for readings, discussion activities and reflection to guide participants through the journey. The asynchronous material prepared participants for the synchronous sessions, provided opportunity for their individual learning and served as a resource as they moved out into practice.



Reading prompt



Discussion prompt



Reflection prompt

[The trainers] created space for each of us individually and all of us collectively to participate in co-creating the class. And everything they said and did embodied AI's open, inclusive and generative approach. They not only taught us AI, but they also modeled AI and enabled us to participate directly in AI. I really feel like I have been part of "co-creating powerful learning," and I really appreciate it.

Charlie Biggs, vAIFT participant

The opportunity for intimate conversations with other participants and larger facilitator-led group sessions as these opportunities allowed for sharing and co-creating; engaging IN the AI 5-D process was fantastic. The forum was rich, and some wonderful reflections and thoughts were shared.

Lisa Gedak, vAIFT participant



We found ourselves relying on the simplicity and complexity of AI at every touch point.

Returning to wholeness

The entire project was a balancing act of planning, communication and motivation. We found ourselves relying on the simplicity and complexity of AI at every touch point. There was mutual agreement that maintaining the same high standard of learning was foundational and required for the vAIFT's success. During development, we remained in constant communication with trainers, participants and the core team. It was important for us to relay the progress of the vAIFT development process, including project updates, timelines and launch dates. Our clear and continuous communication channels enabled us to employ the necessary technology, instructional design and operational aspects quickly. The pandemic closed businesses for face-to-face interactions starting March 2020 and we successfully launched the vAIFT pilot in July 2020.

The passion we have for Appreciative Inquiry and the AIFT was foundational to our success, as it fueled our desire to plan, learn from and co-deliver the vAIFT program. Wholeness gave us the capacity to thrive and give new life to the AIFT. The vAIFT feedback and completed practicums for certification as Appreciative Inquiry facilitators demonstrates that the level of instruction and learning was enhanced by moving to virtual. We had the vision that the program would thrive on a grander scale and, as we adapt and change in this new landscape, the vAIFT is doing just that. We now are reaching a larger audience, with diversity of language, culture, gender and experience a feature of the vAIFT.

This experience was a renewal for me. Wholeness has always been my objective working with core teams. To me, it is knowing (a feeling or energy) that all the principles are activated and operating at a high level. I felt it on our first planning call – our passion for Appreciative Inquiry and for the AIFT – when everyone committed to the challenge.
Kathy Becker, president of the Center for Appreciative Inquiry

[Back to Table of Contents](#)