

**Robbert Masselink**

Robbert is a management consultant, facilitator and trainer. He helps teams and individuals to collaborate effectively on organizational development issues. He (co-)authored three Dutch books on Appreciative Inquiry.

Contact: robbert@keynoteconsultancy.nl

**Wick van der Vaart**

Wick van der Vaart has master degrees in Dutch literature and social psychology. In 2005, he founded the Instituut voor Interventiekunde (Institute for Interventionism) in Amsterdam. The core of this Institute is a two-year program in appreciative interventionism. In 2016, he will become Editor-in-Chief of AI Practitioner.

Contact: instituut@instituutvoorinterventiekunde.nl



Interview with René Bouwen: Reflections on building high-quality relational practices in conflict situations

René Bouwen, from Leuven University in Belgium, is one of the few Europeans who have witnessed the development of Appreciative Inquiry at close quarters. The post-Masters Consulting in Groups and Organizations program connects students from Leuven University and Case Western Reserve University in the United States. The interview Wick van der Vaart and Robbert Masselink conducted with him at Leuven University covers topics from how René got involved with Appreciative Inquiry, to AI and conflict, to his hopes for AI in action research.



Earlier this year, we had the opportunity and pleasure to interview René Bouwen from Leuven University in Belgium. René is one of the few Europeans who has witnessed the development of Appreciative Inquiry from a close distance. Together with Felix Corthouts he established close connections with Case Western Reserve University in the eighties. The post-Masters program Consulting in Groups and Organizations (CIGO) is an example of such a connection in which Belgian and American students visited each other during the program. Robbert was fortunate enough to be in the first exchange program that took place many years ago. We met René at Leuven University on a bright autumn day.

We started by asking René how he got involved in Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Before Appreciative Inquiry existed, René said, he was involved in group dynamics and was especially interested in the subject of conflict. His thesis showed that the most creative groups were those that were heterogeneous and where people showed a positive attitude toward diversity. He participated in the first T-group training in Belgium, organized by Gaston de Cock in the early sixties, and studied organizational development and experiential learning at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, USA, in 1975 under the supervision of Suresh Srivastva and David Kolb. In 1978 he became a professor in organizational psychology at the University of Leuven. In 1985 René went back to the United States for a sabbatical at Case Western. He told us: “I had lost faith in traditional research and became inspired again when I was introduced to the article of Kenneth Gergen”.

At that time he also met David Cooperrider, then a doctoral student at Case Western. While David used social constructionism for the development of

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what was later called Appreciative Inquiry, René, together with Paul Salipante, developed a new conflict model – the conflict kaleidoscope – based on the same theory. Conflicts contain different perspectives and these differences can be used to develop the conflict toward movement or solution. This multiplicity of perspectives was a relief for René, because it made conflicts self-evident for him. He could now start taking a look at what people were producing together instead of trying to figure out what was going on inside their heads. This was a revolutionary step within the field of experiential psychology.

Development of Appreciative Inquiry

In those early days, AI was all about action research and wasn't yet called "Appreciative". The emphasis was on open inquiry into what worked well. The complete term was used for the first time by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in their article "Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life", published in 1987. David was conducting research at the Cleveland Clinic, well known for its excellent reputation. But he couldn't find this "excellent" organization that Suresh was talking about, and so David asked where he could find it. "Maybe you're asking the wrong questions" was Suresh's reply, and that became the start of the appreciative approach. That's why, for example, Ronald Fry talks about AI as the art of asking questions.

Initially, René wasn't a believer. It was probably his Flemish nature that kept him from adopting this new approach too quickly – as he saw it, it was typical American positive thinking that sounded a bit naive, but with the best intentions. In the following years, when David Cooperrider and Jane Magruder Watkins applied AI in South America, Africa and eastern Europe, he saw a lot of good work being done. Jane had a great influence on the development of AI, as she stimulated the move from AI as an inquiry method toward a practical intervention method. As a result, AI slowly vanished as a research method.

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René Bouwen

AI as relational practice

Slowly, AI became a part of the CIGO program in Belgium. Ronald Fry, a great ambassador for AI, visited Belgium often then, and still does. He has put more emphasis on the inquiry aspects of AI by stating that it is about asking the right questions.

René's emphasis was more on the application of social constructionism within innovation and conflicts. It was a great combination that was effective because it allowed for the exceptional. Encountering the work of John Shotter, who approached social constructionism from a relational point of view, was another breakthrough for René: he understood why AI was so effective. He told us: "If you want to establish strong connections you'd better start with a positive discovery instead of a negative one. Building relationships happens a lot faster when you start affirming each other. When I saw Appreciative Inquiry as a high-quality relational practice, I could understand its working. This is what made me a believer."

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Appreciative Inquiry and conflict

Because René specialized in conflict, we asked him how AI deals with it. He observed that this is a rather complex relationship. When you have the whole system in the room (one of the principles of AI), conflict can be dealt with effectively. But when you have multiple systems in the room e.g. in multi-actor collaboration projects, and you try to establish common ground when differences can't be negotiated, applying AI is hard: appreciation is only one language among others, so you have to frame and reframe the situation in order to create allowance for differences. Then you can re-negotiate these differences and start your inquiry in order to establish common ground. That is why many people find the Design phase of the AI process so hard. It is in this phase that appreciative stories and future images meet practical realities of what is achievable and what is not. You have to start a new inquiry process, often with new participants, in order to connect the here-and-now reality of AI with the multiple there-and-then realities of the other participants. This can be a tough job. Here lies fertile ground ahead for researchers and practitioners.

Appreciative Inquiry as generative co-inquiry

After a short break, the interview shifted to become more of a conversation. It was as if we were moving away from defining and discovering into dreaming and designing. An appreciative and relational approach creates the conditions for a conversation about what we really want together. We are always creating the things that we truly desire within a given context.

AI doesn't really touch upon the issue of context, in René's opinion. In a context with multiple perspectives, we need an interdisciplinary and systemic approach. And although AI practitioners claim to have answers to systemic questions, our questions have to be stated, heard and responded to in much more complex situations than that of single-system ones.

One way to do this would be to inquire into what works well and what people need to attain their desires from a multi-systems perspective. This means putting emphasis on the relational process, on co-inquiry and provocative questions, which can create sustainable conditions to continue the collaboration and to create new possibilities. For René, sustainability is not only a topic for inquiry, but also a process by which sustainable relational systems are made and continued.

In his own practice, René Bouwen found and explored the idea that a multi-stakeholder, multi-logical, and multi-voiced context demands an appreciative plus a generative co-inquiry. He still wonders how we can make multi-vocality really productive. Curiosity alone is not sufficient: the issues demand a great number of different stakeholders, and require inspiration and beliefs. We especially need a belief in our connectedness, a social belief in who we are as a society, complementary to the firmly established belief in who we are as individuals. That is because our most important questions today – for example immigration and the environment – deal with who we think we are

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as a society, or rather, a multiplicity of societies. So we have to keep asking questions of ourselves and of each other about our shared ambitions. We would like to thank René for sharing his experience, insights and future expectations with us.

Afterword from René Bouwen:

Thanks to Wick and Robbert for this creative conversation to help to write my history with Appreciative Inquiry. I want to add a short comment: AI as a coaching and intervention approach became successful in consulting contexts rather quickly, but it is only recently that academic research is joining the scholarly discussion again. The “generative turn” (as it is expressed by Gervase Bushe and Ronald Fry), the overarching “positive”, as well as “negative”, framing of issues can perhaps reconnect AI with its action research origins.

This generativity of AI is anchored in its capacity to build high-quality relational practices that can reconnect differences between diverse actors. Issues can be framed with so-called positive or negative terminology, but the connecting power of AI practices may be the crucial element to create new possibilities. Our social and organizational world is full of challenging differences and strong oppositions. Searching for and enhancing, bridging and re-connecting practices among different actors and issues goes beyond mere positive or negative terms. Re-framing is carried by relational practices that can enact common futures. When diverse actors want to engage in participatory action research, AI can be the high-quality relational practice to carry the social construction work. AI can perhaps become a lasting contribution to the methodology of qualitative social research. Such an academic recognition can only contribute to further creative applications in here-and-now consulting work.

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