

Voices of AI: Gathering the Stories

This is a summary of a question about the best format for interviews in the Discovery phase of an Appreciative Interview and the responses generated on the AI Listserv in July, 2005. Since this question is so central to excellence in the practice of AI, and the responses were so rich with experience, we pulled the thread together into this document for ease of reference.

Contributors words are used with permission. Visit the archive of the AI Listserv to explore other conversation threads at <http://mailman.business.utah.edu:8080/pipermail/ailist/>

Compiled and submitted by Debbie Morris, aicommons@earthlink.net

The question

From Mary Liz Grise <ml.grise@dal.ca>
Sent: Wednesday, July 06, 2005 6:39 AM
Subject: [Ailist] Gathering the Stories

The question is about the format for doing interviews. Is it better to have two people interviewing each other and taking notes as they go, or to have a third person sitting in as a scribe? Would that person have to be trained, or at least be identified as having scribing skills? Would this lead to a more faithful rendition of the original story? What about recording the interviews and scribing afterwards? Would this reduce the quality of the stories because of evaluation apprehension?

It can't be very efficient to have a scribe in a situation where you are trying to collect hundreds of stories, but without one, I wonder if the original story often gets lost due to filtering and interpretation. Or is this taken care of afterwards when the pairs come back to the larger group, and the stories are repeated, or when the story is returned to the teller to confirm accuracy before including it in any documentation?

The greatest "nugget" I took from my Foundations course was, "go back to the stories", and I saw the wisdom of this, even in later stages of the 4D process, because it cut through confusion and tangential meanderings. Bringing people back to their stories seems to keep them focused, and could increase the richness of the stories. Perhaps this is all that is needed.

Anyway, before I proceed this coming year towards a large story gathering process, I would love to hear from other members about their own experiences in story gathering and the formats that work best for them.

Thanks.

The Responses

From: Malcolm Odell <macodell@adelphia.net>

Indeed, stories are the heart of the AI process, and that's why I call 'Discovery' the "Super D."

If we get great stories, great Discovery, then the rest of the AI process flows like water over the dam. No stopping it.

Marcia did an introductory WORTH workshop with women in Kenya not long ago and, due to time conflict, kept the process just to Discovery and Dreams... Lots of great stories, lots of grand dreams. Then she had to go to a lunch event previously scheduled.

After lunch when she was about to leave, one of the participants from the workshop stopped her. "You can't leave yet. The women are waiting for you." "What women?" asked Marcia.

"The women from this morning's workshop. They want to share with you their work plans and commitments for getting the program started."

Design and Delivery done.. by the women themselves, without any coaching, direction, without facilitator.. on their own. They just said, "We can't just stop with our Dreams, we have to make some plans... Let's do it now!" So they did... That's a story in itself...

So, to try to answer the question: In our experience the real power comes in people telling their own stories... sharing with others...

Not quite so much power comes with others retelling someone's story; not so much power in transcription... and when people tell their own stories it is like reliving the event and all the feelings and memories associated with the original event come flooding out... Nothing like it.

So how to maximize that, and still gather the stories to share beyond the groups? What seems to work best from my perspective is the classic paired conversations, especially among strangers, or among those that know each other least well... Then we have pairs come together into groups of 4 - 8, depending on size of larger group, and partners introduce their new friends and tell what particularly inspired them about their partner's story... When we're working with larger groups, then once everyone has been introduced and highlights of stories shared, we then ask each group to choose one of their favorite stories to share with larger group, and/or ask groups to write up their best stories for posting, leaving it to them to decide who/how to write up.

This would be a fabulous time to video their favorites, as others have suggested.

WORTH/WEP in Nepal hired a full-time 'Story Master' who had the job of collecting and disseminating stories... including training field staff on how to write up the best stories, since most of those involved were illiterate... but that's a digression.

The AI video, "Improbable Pairs" uses video to capture incredible stories from those directly affected by the violence in S. Africa and West Bank... again, people telling their own stories..

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From: "Sue Hammond" <shammond@bendbroadband.com>

I think this is a both/and kind of answer...it all works if there is authentic listening. I do want to point out something Cathy Royal taught me, the concept of Permission to Publish. What that

means is that the stories shared between two people remain between the two until there is explicit permission to share the stories to the larger group.

This gets into all kinds of privacy issues that I think a lot about in my work. I know we all approach this a bit differently but Cathy does a lot of diversity work and has a nuanced sensitivity to power issues. She really changed my thinking about any sharing of stories at a larger level...I now approach this much more cautiously and I hope as a result more respectfully.

Sue

From: "marge schiller" <margeschiller@yahoo.com>

I have done trios and with great success. The groups just have less time.

We still have not tested the boundaries of what can work with AI interviews. For example when I worked on the GTE (Now Verizon) AI intervention, one of the teams wanted to do long distance phone interviews- we know the power of being face to face so this presented a challenge.

I asked the prospective interviewers about the best experience they had talking on the phone. People remembered teen age conversations that went on for hours- privacy and a soda seemed to be the important ingredients. The interviews were excellent. So the moral of the story is that when we follow the principles of AI and keep to the Positive Core of the practice there are many different approaches that will work.

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From: "Scott Wolf" <wsw@saizhoo.com>

I have used trios, and while it was not, at the time, inside of an AI exercise, it may be applicable. The third person was not a scribe, but rather an observer. What they were observing was the process itself. It was a few years ago, so I'm recreating this on the spot, but the people who played the observer role reported that doing so was as valuable to their own development as either of the other two roles.

What they reported was that while they were interviewing or responding, it's much more challenging to observe oneself, so having the opportunity to just observe how others are doing told them a lot. What we asked them to watch for were 2 key things:

1) What are you seeing, hearing or noticing from either the interviewer or the interviewee that you like and want to try yourself? What do you think the interviewer is doing really great? Is there

anything that they're doing that you want to try out for yourself? Is there anything that they're doing really well that now that you see it, you know you do that too? Etc.

2) What ways do you see to strengthen or deepen the conversation? What things do you do that you usually take for granted but can now see that how much it bring to your conversations?

One participant summed it up by saying something like, "So if I think they're better than I am, the question is, "what do I want to learn from them?". And if I think I'm better than they are, the question is, "what can I now say I'm reliable for bring to the conversation?"

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From: "Robyn S Berkessel" <robyn@litglobal.com>

A real aha for me about sharing of stories using the discovery paired interview process came from a couple of pieces of feedback from participants in a introductory seminar to AI. The feedback was that when you went from paired interviews to sharing the stories with a larger group (to collect high points and themes) and you knew you had to share your interview partner's story with others, you became so much more focused and attentive to the other person rather than thinking about what comes next.... Listening became such a respectful act. Second piece was that when you heard your own story told by your interview partner and you heard good things about yourself, it was very special and instilled pride and a good feeling.

My sense around having a third member - great to take notes, freeing the interviewer up to really focus on the interviewee - it seems more like an activity in observation and needing to give feedback on the performance of either one or both parties - a type of skills development activity Vs one of genuine respectful inquiry.

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From: Ron Velin <rgvelin@yahoo.com>

I always remind people that their stories do not have to be shared with the larger group - that they can share some of the learning from their stories instead. Solves the problem every time (so far! :))

Ron V.

From: sherene zolno <coachpb@comcast.net>

While there seems to be a lot of intensity on 'capturing' the story in your design, I think it would be valuable to remember that the change you are hoping for is ALREADY occurring in the act of telling the story and having it being heard.

Also, a well-heard story can be documented by the listener in a few notes, and scribed after if done soon after the telling.

Sherene Zolno

From: Jen Hetzel Silbert <jen@innovationpartners.com>

Inquiry = Change. So easy, yet so often forgotten. Thanks, Sherene, for this important reminder.

Often during the interview process (and especially during the small group dialogue) we might be tempted to record or scribe all the data gathering details in the hope of "re-telling" the story down the road. We have to remember, however, that it's not just the CONTENT of what we tell but the CONTEXT in which it is told that gives the story so much life. This is what makes an appreciative interview so much more powerful than traditional data gathering methods. We're not just storyTELLING, but also storyLISTENING, and combined these activities make our boldest dreams not only compelling, but practical and necessary for our road ahead.

But just as much as we parents LOVE to relive the joy of our daughter's first steps, first words, etc., so would we love to relive our clients' storytelling experiences. Why not hear it from the horse's mouth (almost literally)? Consider setting up a tripod video camera in an isolated location where participants (or interview pairs) can take a seat and re-tell their most compelling stories. They could do this on their own time, so as to not interfere with the interview or small group work activities, then all you need are a few minor edits and you can cherish the stories for a lifetime.

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Date: Wed, 6 Jul 2005
From: "Ann Brown" <arbrowninc@telus.net>

I too have used the duo/trio formats depending on the group. I find the twosomes are best when people are new to these kinds of processes and are not used to telling their own stories. I like the suggestions for deepening the experience through writing and recording. I think you could use CD/tape (audio) when the budget doesn't run to video :)

Has anyone else experienced the interview process in a 6 - 8 person group setting? It can also be powerful and I've seen major shifts in group dynamics after such a session. I can remember stories from all the sessions I have had the privilege of being allowed to attend by the group - I always ask permission! The group also quickly latches onto the "quotable quotes" and creates group language in the moment.

And regarding staying true to the story - good advice. When synthesizing the stories, developing themes and later writing the Possibility Statements encourage people to continually do a "sanity check" and make sure they see their story in what is created. It adds more richness and sometimes later discoveries for the participant about the meaning of the story.

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Date: Thu, 07 Jul 2005
From: "Lionel Boxer" <lionel.boxer@rmit.edu.au>

You can record with your laptop in wav format (then convert into MP3) if you have latest version of windows.

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From: Mary Liz Grise <ml.grise@dal.ca>

There is probably a nifty piece of software that you can use to do this, but I use what I have:

Get a microphone that will connect to your PC.

You can use the Windows Sound Recorder, but it is a bit of a pain - it starts off recording just 60 seconds, and you have to hit the record icon everytime 60 secs to keep it going.

Instead, I use Powerpoint, Record Narration. Once the file is saved, (play with the different settings to get it right), you can go the folder where it saved and find the wav file that was created.

There are probably better ways, but this is free if you already have Powerpoint.

From: David Saunders <david@dns.org.uk>

Mary Grice's neat suggestion works on the Mac (PowerBooks, iBooks and desktops) as well, I've just tried it.

> ... use Powerpoint, Record Narration. Once the file is saved,
> (play with the different settings to get it right), you can go the
> folder where it saved and find the wav file that was created.

It's very easy to create and manage (and -- think about this -- present...) a collection of appreciative interview recordings this way. You can associate one interview with each slide if you set up a bunch of blank or annotated slides ahead of time (edit in key phrases and provocative propositions later?). Practice this first to get the idea before you do it in a live situation.

Change Recording Formats. PowerPoint recordings on a Mac are in AIFF format -- the same format as audio CD's. Formats are easily changed on a Mac OR a PC by importing into iTunes -- just drag the recordings or the whole folder into the iTunes window or onto the iTunes Icon. Depending on your import preferences settings, you can convert to .wav, .mp3, etc... iTunes for Mac and PC is a free download at <http://www.apple.com/itunes/download/>

Podcast your Interviews... N.B.iTunes 4.9 brings podcasting which is the smart way to catch up with the best radio shows on your computer or your iPod, MP3 player, PDA, handheld PC, mobile phone, etc... I highly recommend Lord Melvyn's Bragg's fabulous 'In Our Time' weekly broadcast on Radio 4 as a podcast -- this is the world's best '1 on 3' appreciative interviews on a fabulously eclectic range of topics. Maybe we start Podcasts on AI from the AI Commons?...

Your Mac already has a built in microphone, so you don't need anything else. If you DO get a microphone, to improve quality, most Macs don't have an analogue audio input socket, so get a USB microphone (just google on it there are millions) of a 'Griffin iMic' (or similar) to convert an analogue mic to digital USB. Works just fine - you may have to tweak Voice Input setting in System Preferences

iPods can do this too. A Mac or a PC is a pretty clunky tape recorder, whereas iPods are small, light, ubiquitous and useful. And they (iPods with disks, not the iPod shuffle) can record too with a Griffin iTalk adapter which works straight out of the box, or you can use a conventional microphone via a Belkin universal microphone adapter. All this available from Apple stores or online for small bucks.

Record Online Appreciative Conferences. Here's another though while we're at it. I Use Apple's iChat instant messaging program for voice and video conferences with buddies and of course you can do similar things with PCs, and probably across platforms as well though I haven't tried that yet. I use a handy-dandy little piece of shareware, imaginatively called 'Conference Recorder' (\$14.95 from <http://www.ecamm.com/mac/conferencerecorder/>) to record audio and video conferences. You must have all participants permission for

this. This means you can use your computer to create and record appreciative interviews -- including videos -- from round the world.

Editing your Interviews. There are a couple of tools that extend the above on the Mac. Garageband can be used to edit audio tracks and add in other music and so on, and iMovie can be used to edit audio and video, adding in more sound and video tracks, pictures and captions, and, with iDVD, to create complete DVDs. All these are part of the iLife package which comes free with most new Macs including the Mac mini, or \$79 from the Apple store -- amazing for a complete (entry-level) audio/video create/editing suite.

On Your PC too. I've written this to give a broader picture of what's possible these days. PCs aren't just about Word Processing -- we're not in Kansas any more (except of course for those of you who are ;-)
There's tons of good cheap shareware and widgets available for this kind of thing on both PCs and Macs. I'm happy to chat direct -- I'm better on Macs, but Steve Jobs is bringing the debate "which is better, the Mac or the PC?" (Al Gore calls it a 'Boxers vs Briefs' question) right to the PC, by moving the Mac to Intel PC chips.

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From: "Loretta Donovan" <lldonovan@earthlink.net>

My experience with triads has occurred when either an odd number of participants had required one or when a client had requested groups of three. The third participant in these situations was not instructed to act as a scribe or notetaker. She/he was a listener as well. In observing the interaction of the triads, I sensed that the level of engagement and intimacy was not as deep as when the stories were shared in pairs. It could be that the story-teller was prone to want to relate to two people which became a distraction. I would be interested to hear if others have had a similar experience.

On another note, your wanting "a more faithful rendition of the original story" introduces an industrial, technical, quantitative requirement, in my view, that overlooks the holistic experiences of the story-teller and listener in recalling a fruitful situation. What I am referring to is their individual and joint perceptions of the sensed experience of motivation, intention, collaboration, adaptation, invention, participation or insight.

Small details, that are omitted in recording stories, are not lost to the inquiry. They are present in the storyteller and may still find their way ninto the dream and design phases, should they be important and useful to the process.

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From: Paul Dyer <affirmworks@paradise.net.nz>

I would like to endorse these comments, pairs are my norm for the interviews however I have learned that there are some settings where for cultural and other reasons patterns of talking are different from the familiar interview that is so much part of our western inheritance, so there are times when the discovering process usually covered by paired interviews takes place in a more communal conversation.

The important lesson is the do as Marge suggests - keep focused on what will provide the best setting for these people to name the positive core.

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From: "Charlotte Henley" <chenley@hur.midco.net>

It is wonderful to see all the different insights into the storytelling. In reading your suggestions and experiences I am reminded that there is more than one way and that each way unfolds unique experiences for the listener and the teller.

My insights are somewhat different than others. I prefer telling stories in pairs because of the intimacy.... I have found from my personal experience (AI trainings, A Summit and the Conference), that a sense of responsibility is created that caused me to feel like a champion for the person I was listening to. A good bond is forged that served as an important connection throughout the rest of the AI experience. At the conference the person I was paired with (from the Navy) sought me out in the closing moments so that we could share our experience and how we were affected. I will never forget this person. It was a reflection of my growth.

When it comes to retelling the story, I allow each person to retell their own story to the larger group. I do this for two reasons:

One: whenever I am told that I have to retell someone else's story I tend to become focused on myself and my ability to retell the story rather than being a truly attentive listener that seeks to understand the essence of the story.

The **second** reason I allow the person to retell their own story is because it is their story. I have had my story told incorrectly which doesn't feel good, and/or I felt disappointed that some key elements of the story were left out. In another instance I had one participant that said, "I don't have a peak experience." It took some coaching to unearth some remarkable stories. I wanted her to retell the story again to the large group, with the idea that she would strengthen her inner dialogue. She reflected on the experience for days.

The process of telling my story helped to change my inner dialogue. There is a certain confirmation I have when I get to tell a story about myself without worrying about boasting since it is within the process. This process gives you some power within to say "I'm pretty good."

So, I have each one in the group retell their own story with a time limit and then the interviewer points out some of the key elements or insights that he/she gained from the story or something they liked about the story.

As I reflect back on my training experiences and the recent summit I attended.... there was no mention prior to the interviews that I would have to retell my partner's story..... I think that is a good strategy so that the listening becomes a way to honor the person and not hear things that I will need to repeat. My two experiences with Ann Brown taught me to be a better listener. She had a great way of setting up the interview that focused on listening. This may be another good topic for discussion.

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From: "Maureen McKenna" <maureenmckenna@sympatico.ca>

My only experience of two people conducting the interview was a recent project with the Toronto District School Board. A colleague (Sue Anderson) and I worked with the TDSB on a project called Imagine Student Success.

About 120 schools participated and each school had 6 students (grades 7, 8 or 9) trained to go out and interview students and adults. Since the students had to write up the stories and input into the iCohere website ... it was felt that it would be easier for the students to conduct the interviews in pairs. One student asked the question and the other took notes (some students used mindmaps to capture the information). Each pair conducted 6 interviews and the students took turns to be the interviewer and note taker. After they had completed the interview, together they wrote up the story and entered it into the web site. On May 3, we had all the teachers and students (from 115 schools) attend a summit and invited principals, trustees and other key stakeholders - in total there was over 700 students and a couple of hundred adults at the summit.

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From: David Snider <davidsnider@mindspring.com>

Hi Mary Liz and Everyone

My first response to your question was that it is better to have the person doing the interviewing also taking notes. My rationale: the speaker may feel more "heard" if the person asking questions is writing down what is said. I have observed interviewing pairs during that period of our work, and making notes seemed not to interfere with the process.

Then I recalled a time when in a planning group of 6 people I wrote on easel paper while one person interviewed and four others watched and listened. Then the whole group found the themes in what I had heard from interviews and recorded.

Both these very different methods worked. That means people seemed to be engaged with each other and came up with really interesting, personal, appreciative material.

My tentative conclusion: the format may matter little. The key, I suspect, is that participants have "grasped" the AI appreciative intention of the questions and process.

Now I think of one other aspect of the trio (interviewers/interviewees plus recorder) question. One-on-one feels like an easier way for two folks to "connect" without the presence of recorder/observer. Also, using trios would leave unanswered this question: how does the recorder/observer feel and be included in the AI interviews?

Best to you,

David

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