

# Company of Experts Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Practicum Report **Luke Young**

## Organisation worked with:

UNIMA South Africa ([unimasouthafrica.org](http://unimasouthafrica.org)) is a South African Arts NGO that acts as an umbrella body for puppetry and visual performance.

Its major projects are a year-round community skills development programme and an annual international festival ([outtheboxfestival.com](http://outtheboxfestival.com))

I worked with the team that curates, organizes and manages the festival. At my suggestion they allowed me to facilitate their 'debriefing' meeting held just after this year's festival - a meeting that is usually a lot about the problems that happened and how can we fix them for next year.

## Core group:

As the organisation is quite small (7 people), and they initially only wanted a 3 hour session, I elected to predefine the topic with the CEO. Her main concerns were around people not taking responsibility for their areas, not knowing whether the festival will go ahead next year and concern about further funding (this year the festival nearly cancelled due to this). We decided to go with an inquiry into when people felt most aligned with what they were doing - thinking this might mean they took responsibility too.

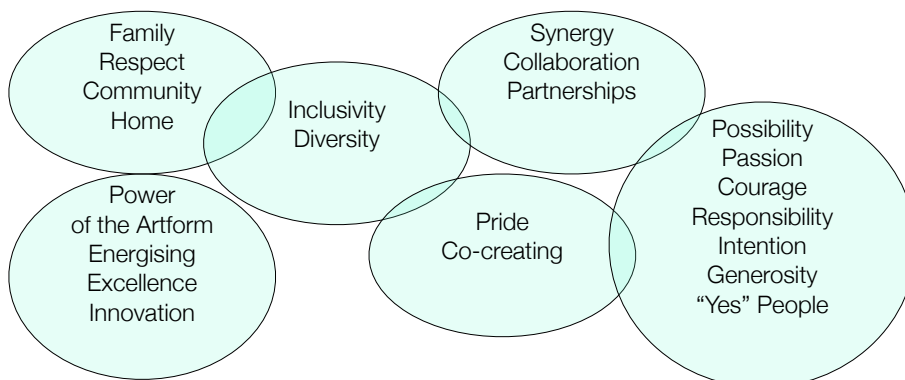
Just before the session, in my preparation call with my mentor, I realised I hadn't quite got the topic unconditionally positive yet. So I elected with a general focus on 'best experience', thus allowing the first session to be quite broad.

## Process:

Initially a three hour meeting - which was extended to two further three hour meetings.

### Meeting 1

After a brief introduction to AI, participants did paired interviews using the modified interview guide(attached at end) for about 30mins each way. After that, individuals fed back on their partner's experiences, and I captured the following themes:



From a scattergram - the following were the 'hottest', 'sexiest' words for them: **Innovation, Passion & Synergy**.

## Provocative Proposition

**"We are a passionate festival of Yes people energizing the art-form through excellence, diversity & innovation".**

At that point we wrapped, after an appreciative round. I was invited to facilitate their follow on meeting 2 weeks later.

### Meeting 2

During this meeting I focussed on simply holding an appreciative space for them, and coming back to the question - 'How do we make that future inevitable?'

On my preparatory call with my mentor - she gave me the following coaching - "resist nothing, accept everything; return the focus to the if giving". In my preparation of the room - I put up sheets with the PP, the order of the day, some other pointers and that quote - to remind me.

This was immediately necessary - the group didn't want to follow my 'lead' - they wanted to discuss funding. So, after an initial worry that I wasn't going to get my practicum done(!), I let go of the resistance and went with what they wanted - realising later that strategically that was exactly what they needed to focus on in order to make their provocative proposition inevitable.

What they wanted was to choose between having the festival in 2011 or only 2012. Everyone was on the fence, and pros and cons were the order of the day.

After some star coaching from my mentor in a break, I returned and asked them simply which choice gave them more energy?

Suddenly everyone was off the fence (all bar one). And interestingly a new choice appeared - synergising the two camps - **2011 with money**.

### Strategic Intention created to realize the Provocative Proposition:

So, in this breakthrough decision the organisation, who - due largely to funding problems, were considering becoming a biennial was taken in session 2. This decision was in effect the key strategic intention. It was also a great result for the process - a difficult and emotionally charged decision was taken with people being self-motivated (remember back to the CEOs concern about people being 'aligned' with their work and taking responsibility) As their decision was to continue as an annual festival, but with adequate funding, they articulated **the key strategic intention as "2011 With Money"** This, in effect became the topic of a sub inquiry.

I then set up the follow on meeting to that to focus the whole team on creating '2011 with money'.

### Meeting 3

Meeting 3 was about getting down to details and actions.

I asked the group for commitments, based on *easy wins, volunteerism and improvisation*.

After a brainstorm planning of next steps to make the PP inevitable, team members (indicated by their initials) took on aspects of that plan:

YH	JD	CM	JvM	JP	JY
British Council	Vivi	ACT	NFVF	Advertising	GIPCA
Korea	Belgium	City of Cape Town	Research embassies	Research international art funders	NLTDF
Australia	Venue securing	DCAS	Japanese?	Student participation	NAC
Argentina	Dutch	Habitat	Cape Film Commission	Research new sponsors	Pro – H
	Other artists (international embassies)	2 Corporates	Following up with Animation SA for leads	Research private donors	Puma
	French	1 NGO Partner		Look at Baxter, Jazzart and Artscape	Private + Communities
	Robert Lapage – Canadian embassy				Standard Bank
	UCT * Mikes Funding Book				Africalia
					Cape 3 Foundation

Apologies if this is somewhat cryptic - it just seems beyond the scope of this report to explain all points of the plan - suffice to say that **all** team members, for the **first** time were involved in fundraising.

## Impact or Results

**What organizational, group or community attitude, process or structure changes have people already made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can you share?**

First result came in the day after the first meeting when a participant (she runs the community skills development programme I mentioned above) called me asking for the interview guide. She was so inspired by the meeting that she wanted to do an AI with her group!

Secondly the fact that the organisation chose to put the festival on in 2011 is a major result - they would have decided something without the process - but this decision is directly connected with the organisations lif giving forces, and therefore, as I mentioned people are naturally **aligned** with the decision.

Then, in launching next years festival, they declared themselves as their Provocative Proposition to the public. A key board member wrote back that it was the first newsletter that made her proud to be part of the organisation.

Lastly, **everyone** has committed to fundraising actions - again a major breakthrough and a previous source of frustration for the CEO.

**What will you do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Proposition(s)? How will you help them gather stories of success? How will you help them celebrate? How will you, as the AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?**

I will be facilitating an appreciative assessment of this round of fundraising in August, to complete the cycle of this strategic intention and create the next strategic intentions.

### **What did you wish for in the inquiry?**

I didn't formulate a clear wish, but the implicit one was to do an excellent job and be appreciated.

### **What did you learn from the inquiry about yourself and your facilitation?**

A lot! For one, I had a mini-epiphany about *easy wins* - usually we want solutions to be hard - and we don't trust the easily come by ones. I realised that is because in a problem solving mindset, struggle and effort are the only ways to solve the problem, in a way they *prove* there is a problem. In an appreciative mindset, there are possibilities, and so naturally *ease is something we experience*.

I assimilated the process much deeper than through the training. I also learnt that really Ai is simple - it's a place to come from, more than a technique. I also learnt that I can really trust the group to come up with the answers - I don't need to do it for them (a tough one for me).

At the same time I realised that there's a difference between getting out of the way and checking out. In session three, I was starting to feel somewhat unnecessary to the ongoing process, and then the CEO was late and when one of the directors expressed their anger about that, I simply checked out of the process, and became a scribe rather than a facilitator.

What I learnt from that experience was that I need to feel that the group needs me, and if I don't feel that, I simply check out and let them carry on. On reflecting on that, I realise that in reality the group doesn't need or not need me - they'd be fine if I wasn't there, so it's not about that. If anything that's just a personal insecurity. What I can choose is to participate fully with the energy of the group and so thereby co-create something inspiring. But they don't need me to do that, and that's ok.

### **What was your "personal best" experience related to facilitating the Inquiry?**

Definitely when, with 5 minutes left in the first session, they came up with a fantastic provocative proposition - a clear case of myself stepping aside and trusting them to create what was most meaningful to them. And what they created was really an inspiring, unconditionally positive and 'hot' future. Also I think when I was thanked, twice, for my leadership.

### **Have you received permission from the "client" to tell us their story?**

Yes.

## Appendix

# OUT THE BOX FESTIVAL APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY QUESTIONS

## BEST EXPERIENCE

Tell me a story about your best experience in the festival - a time where you were most aligned with what you were doing?

- Looking at your entire experience, recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, or most excited about your involvement.
- What made it an exciting experience? Who was involved? Describe the event in detail.

## VALUES

Let's talk for a moment about some things you value deeply; specifically, the things you value about yourself; about the nature of your work in the festival; and about this team.

- Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself – as a person and as a member of this festival team?
- When you are feeling best about your work, what about the task itself do you value?
- What do you value about the team?
- What is the single most important thing that your team has contributed to your life? to the world?

## CORE VALUE

What do you experience as the unconditionally positive core value of the festival team?

Give some examples of how you experience those values.

## THREE WISHES

Imagine this festival functioning at it's best, in terms of what what you want - what three wishes would you make to heighten the vitality and health of this festival?