Like Peanut Butter and Jelly: Maximizing Generativity with DE and AI

by Kate Larose

Some things just naturally fit together well. Consider the well-worn example of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for instance. On their own, each ingredient brings something to the table. Sliced bread. That's pretty cool! A non-perishable paste packed with protein and loads of sugar? Yes please! And jelly…I mean, what's not to love there? And yet mix them all together and you have something truly transformational—a delightful little snack whose very mention elicits positive emotions and rumbly tummies in both the young and old alike. (Unless you have a nut or gluten allergy. Or are on a low-glycemic diet. If so, just try and roll with the image as I'm getting to the point shortly.) The earthy savoryness of the peanut butter highlights the sweet notes of the strawberries harvested at the height of their ripeness. The soft chewiness of the bread soaks up the spirit of the jelly, and sets off the occasional crunch of the peanut butter. (Yes, I am of the crunchy peanut butter ilk!) In short, the sum is greater than the individual parts, and each ingredient actually serves to further bring out the best in the other. **And this is exactly how I see Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Dialogue Education (DE) these days!**


MY LEARNING JOURNEY
One year ago I started Case Western Reserve's [Appreciative Inquiry Certificate in Positive Business and Society Change](link). Through a mix of classroom instruction, field work, [Business as an Agent of World Benefit](link) interviews, and a written capstone paper, I found that my learning journey had a

profound impact when I paused to reflect on how AI and DE bring out the best in one another. (For those of you who are relative newcomers to AI such as myself, I invite you to check out this fantastic summary written by Jackie Kelm. For those of you for who are unfamiliar with DE's learning-centered approach to teaching, you can find out more here.) Last week I had the good fortune to travel to Cleveland to complete my certificate and learn from the experiences of my global cohort members. As with all deep learning, it was exhilarating and it was exhausting, and I am filled to the brim with both possibility and questions! In short, this was my year in review:
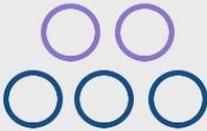
My AI Journey
(the infographic!)
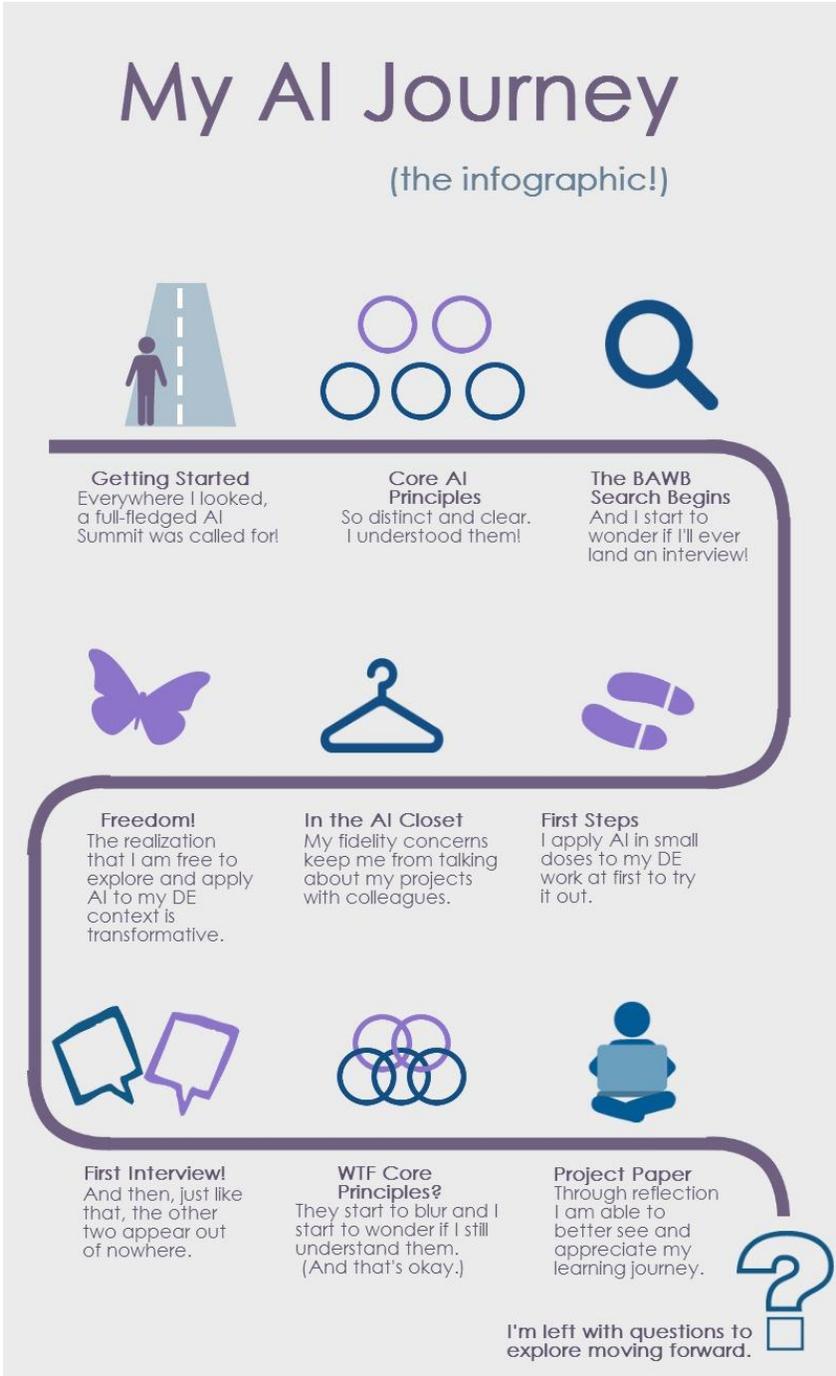
Getting Started
Everywhere I looked, a full-fledged AI Summit was called for!

Core AI Principles
So distinct and clear. I understood them!

The BAWB Search Begins
And I start to wonder if I'll ever land an interview!

Freedom!
The realization that I am free to explore and apply AI to my DE context is transformative.
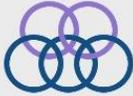
In the AI Closet
My fidelity concerns keep me from talking about my projects with colleagues.

First Steps
I apply AI in small doses to my DE work at first to try it out.

First Interview!
And then, just like that, the other two appear out of nowhere.

WTF Core Principles?
They start to blur and I start to wonder if I still understand them. (And that's okay.)

Project Paper
Through reflection I am able to better see and appreciate my learning journey.

I'm left with questions to explore moving forward.

Throughout this learning journey I saw many overlaps between DE's core principles and practices and those of AI. While I was able to directly explore some of these within the timeframe of this certificate program—such as applying an 8 Steps of Design process, and applying learning needs and resources assessments and achievement-based objectives to all AI work projects—I am looking forward to diving deeper moving forward. I was intrigued by what AI outside of the context of a summit could look like…how it might be applied to all aspects of organizational life. Little by little, I started experimenting with applying the principles in different contexts, inspired by—what else— questions! For example:

- *What does an unconditionally positive question look like in a client meeting?*

- *What can I do to help further develop an appreciative eye, personally, within GLP, and with the organizations we work with?*

- *As questions themselves are interventions, what can I ask to incite positive change?*

- *How might I create more opportunities for developing shared visions of the future?*

Rather than seeking out opportunities for large-scale AI summits (which was how I entered into this journey), I looked to the daily tasks and interactions I already had such as meetings with potential partners, staff supervision, team meetings, annual reviews, client work, and community member gatherings. One preconception that I had to overcome early on was my belief that there was a prescribed way that one must *do* AI. In all honesty, I was doing my AI work in a bit of a closeted manner. Though I was applying my learning directly to my work, I found myself doing it in a way that made the most sense and was most beneficial given my context. I was reluctant to share or talk about what I was doing with other cohort members out of a misplaced fear that I was not doing so with fidelity to the "AI process". (My internal chatter often sounded a lot like this: *Four Ds or five Ds? Shoot, what if I only have time for one D? What if it only makes sense to focus on two Ds right now? What if I just want to employ appreciative questions to quickly identify life-giving forces to inform a totally different process all together? This is prime for an AI summit but I don't have the time or resources***!)**

After several conversations with Dr. Lindsey Godwin, an AI expert based here in Vermont and, unbeknownst to her, my mentor throughout this process, my fears were assuaged and my focus redirected from process to principles. "How about examining how you've honored the core principles of AI?" Lindsey suggested. [Cue the "Hallelujah" music in my head.] What a liberating feeling being able to serve as a co-creator of new methodologies of AI as applied to my work at GLP! (As a side note, I often hear this same fidelity concern from practitioners of DE and would

agree: it's easy to get hung up on the process, but it's really all about how you honor the principles and practices of DE!)

WHAT I'VE EXPERIENCED

Through the integration of both AI and DE into my practice, I've experienced a deeper level of curiosity and have seen increased generativity in group settings. I am mindful of the powerful ability we each possess to reframe a situation and appreciate it in a different light, one that enables us to see the possibilities before us. (*What if all teachers applied an appreciative lens as they supported students in their learning? What if all learners and organizations were invited to discover their core values and work towards a shared vision? How can we support one another to make this happen?*) My passion for this work has been reignited, my understanding of partnerships in a world of abundance has been reframed, and I am looking forward to exploring my many questions moving forward.

A few of my questions are listed below and I'm genuinely curious…

- *What would you add to the list?*

- *What can you share with all of us all based on what you've seen and learned from your experiences?*
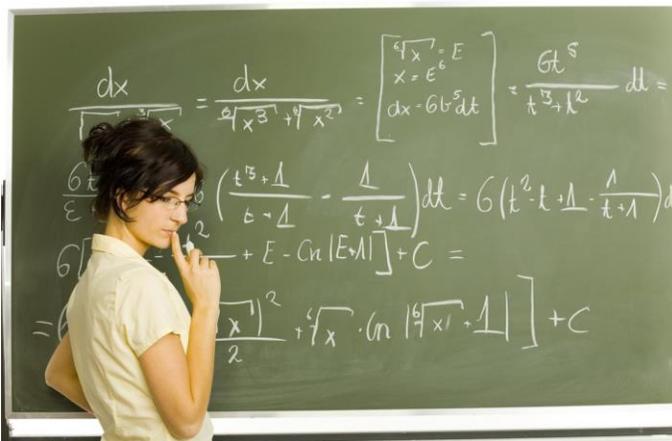
QUESTIONS FOR YOU

- *How have you seen the core principles and practices of DE and AI support and transform one another?*

- *How might we further integrate an AI approach in our practice as Dialogue Educators?*

- *At their best, how do the DE principles of safety, transparency and mutual accountability show up within AI?*

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