



Using Appreciative Inquiry in Educational Research: Possibilities and Limitations

Report

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Key findings

- The main strengths of AI identified in this study included providing a new outlook on particular topic, avoiding stereotypical answers, empowering participants and identifying good practice
- AI can be used as an evaluative technique, but its main purpose is to identify good practice, introduce and implement change successfully. For this reason, it could be a useful methodology for schools and LAs to use in order to bring about change.
- Involving participants in conducting AI interviews provides opportunities for a high level of participation, promotes a sense of ownership of the process and outcomes.
- AI facilitators play an important role in ensuring that participants understand what is expected from them, are trained in AI interview techniques and supported through the various stages of the AI.
- Implementing AI requires commitment on behalf of all participants especially those in positions of responsibility, in order instigate change.
- AI is not suitable for research into problematic social phenomena, or where participants have very limited experience of the topic.
- It is possible to borrow elements from AI, particularly appreciative questions, and incorporate them into a traditional evaluation studies. However, it is important that evaluators who take this approach acknowledge that they have not implemented AI in full but have merely borrowed elements of it.

1. Introduction

Appreciative inquiry (AI) was initially developed as a method for promoting organisational development. However, over the last decade it has also been increasingly deployed as a research tool in education. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) funded and conducted a pilot study of AI to investigate its potential use in educational research. In particular, the study aimed to:

- explore the potential and limitations of using AI as a research approach
- identify the effectiveness of using AI as a research approach
- consider possible changes and modifications needed when using AI
- identify any potential areas where AI might be a valuable research technique
- explore the benefits of applying AI from the participants' point of view; and
- examine the financial cost of conducting research using the AI approach.

The context selected for piloting AI was young people and community cohesion. A review of recent literature on community cohesion (Hetherington et al, 2007) revealed a paucity of research on young people's views on what can be considered as good practice in the field of community cohesion. Moreover, the study also found that local authorities (LAs) in deprived areas had implemented several initiatives in schools to build community cohesion, but these initiatives were not sufficiently evaluated. Hence, community cohesion seemed a good choice of focus for the application of AI.

2. What is Appreciative Inquiry?

AI is a relatively new theory which takes a positive approach to organisational development. It aims to identify good practice, design effective development plans, and ensure implementation. It focuses the research process around what works, rather than trying to fix what does not. AI therefore presents an alternative to the problem-solving approach underpinning action research and offers an affirmative approach for evaluating and envisioning future initiatives based on best practice.

AI's originators, Cooperider and Srivastva (1987) criticised the lack of a useful theory generated by traditional action research studies and claimed that the problem solving theory underpinning action research is to blame. They challenged the fact that action researchers tend to assume that their purpose is to solve a problem and thus groups and organisations are treated not only as if they have problems, but also as if there are problems to be solved. Cooperider and Srivastva argued that this view of organising and researching reduces the possibility of generating new theory and new images of the future. As an alternative, they devised the AI model as a change management process using the positive experiences of an organisation or group to bring about change. The main philosophy of AI can be summarised as follows (see Hammond, 1996):

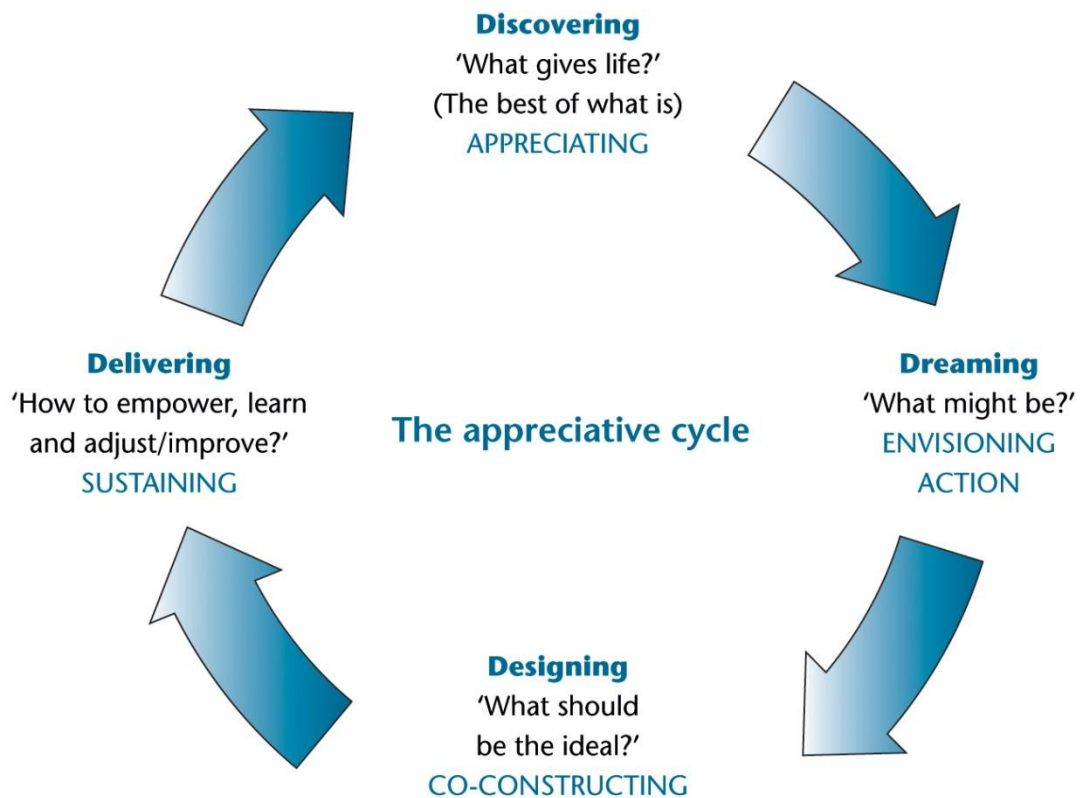
- In every society, organisation or group, something works.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities.
- The act of asking questions of an organisation or group influences the group in some way.
- People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language we use creates our reality.

The application of AI takes place in four stages: discovering, dreaming, designing, and delivering.

1. **Discovering:** finding out the best and most positive experiences participants had in their organisation.
2. **Dreaming:** thinking creatively about the future.
3. **Designing:** designing plans for the future which reflects participants' views of good practice and visions. This phase involves producing provocative propositions, which are statements about what the participants want to achieve.
4. **Delivering:** the energy moves toward action planning, working out what will need to happen to realise the provocative propositions.

The four stages of AI are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The Appreciative Inquiry Cycle



AI is a collaborative and participative approach. It relies on interactive techniques such as group discussion and interviews to identify good practice, consider change, and introduce it to a system. AI views language and words as the basic building blocks of social reality. The most crucial aspect of AI is the interview. Questions are asked that strengthen the system's capacity to identify, anticipate and heighten positive potential. AI interviewing is different from traditional interviews because rather than soliciting facts and opinions, AI interviews seek examples, stories and metaphors. The purpose is to find the best moments, events and stories.

AI interviews can be carried out in pairs or through focus group workshops. In order to maximise participation and dialogue among participants, practitioners of AI often train a number of participants in conducting appreciative interviews. This can maximise participation, energise the participants and thus accelerate positive change.

3. Research methodology

Young people as researchers

A previous study conducted by NFER (Hetherington *et al.*, 2007) identified a lack of research identifying young people's views on community cohesion. Hence, this study aimed to be as participative as possible and to involve young people in all stages of the research. In order to achieve this, young people were trained to conduct appreciative interviews and were asked to interview their peers about community cohesion. Such an approach allowed the involvement of a large number of young people in a short period of time. It was also hoped that such a process would create a dialogue about community cohesion amongst young people. Participants who conducted the interviews attended a training workshop on how to conduct AI interviews. They also took part in analysing the data, and presenting the findings to representatives from their LA.

Sample

Two LAs, one urban and one rural, were selected following an invitation sent out to all LAs in the south east region of England. Each LA was asked to nominate a school where they had applied community cohesion initiatives. Each school was asked to select up to 12 young people between Year 7 and Year 11 to take part in the project. The group of young people selected in the urban area represented different ethnic groups.

Instruments

An AI interview schedule for young people and another AI schedule for school staff were designed to reflect the four different phases of the AI. The schedules were piloted by the two groups of young people and amended subsequently. The research team also designed evaluative interview schedules for the LA and schools' representatives in addition to a proforma for young people.

Research Process

Three group workshops took place with young people in each of the two LAs.

Workshop (1): Train school participants on conducting AI interviews:

The NFER team ran a half-day training workshop for the group of young volunteers in each of the two case-studies. Up to 12 student volunteers in each school across different year groups attended each session. In total we trained 23 young volunteers and two teachers. The session covered the following:

- an introduction to the project
- their role and the activities they will be involved in as part of this project
- an introduction to community cohesion (their definition and the official definition of community cohesion)

- an introduction to AI and its different stages
- conducting AI interviews (asking questions, probing and keeping the focus on the positives)
- note taking
- selecting interviewees
- choosing a venue
- using recording equipment and making notes
- piloting the interview schedules.

During the workshop, participants had the opportunity to interview each other in pairs using a draft AI interview schedule, write up the notes and analyse the data. Following this exercise, participants shared their interview responses with the group and a discussion of their experience took place including reflection on the draft interview schedules. Participants suggested several modifications to the schedules. For example, some terms were too complex for young people and a few students who had English as a second language struggled to understand some of the questions within the schedule. As a result, the research team simplified the schedules, in discussion with the participants. The young researchers also analysed the data and explored how the information could be used to design a plan for developing community cohesion. Finally, the research team went through a list of ‘frequently asked questions’ such as what to do if recording equipment failed or if an interviewee did not show up.

At the end of the workshop each student was given a pack containing recording equipment and blank tapes. In response to the feedback provided from the workshop, the amended AI instruments were distributed to the young people who were asked to conduct an appreciative interview with two young people at their school over a period of a month. In the urban school, participants were encouraged to select at least one interviewee from a different ethnic background. In addition, two young people from each case-study school volunteered to interview one member of school staff. In total 44 young people and four members of school staff were interviewed.

Workshop (2): Discover, share and design

The research team met again with each of the two groups of young people to analyse the data and share the positive stories identified during the interviews. These positive images and visions became the bases of the plan designed by young people to foster community cohesion in the school and their local area.

Workshop (3): Share, design and deliver

This workshop brought together young people and representatives from the LA and the school in each of the two selected areas. Young people presented their plans for developing community cohesion at their school and within their local areas, and discussed with the representatives ways of implementing some of their recommendations.

Evaluation Phase

The NFER research team sent evaluation pro-formas to young people who participated, asking them to reflect on the AI process and their involvement in the project. Telephone and face-to-face interviews with representatives from the two LAs and the two schools were also conducted.

Below is a summary of the main activities conducted in the two schools.

Table 1 AI stages across the research period

| Case-study school 1 – Urban school | Case-study school 2 – Rural school |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| October 2007 – Workshop 1 | January 2008 – Workshop 1 |
| January 2008 – Workshop 2 | March 2008 – Workshop 2 |
| February 2008 – Workshop 3 | June 2008 – Workshop 3 |
| June 2008 - Evaluation Phase | August 2008 - Evaluation Phase |

4. Research findings

Our findings reflect on the various stages and processes of AI to highlight the key issues encountered, which may be helpful to other researchers considering using AI as a research methodology. Findings on community cohesion are reported in a separate publication (Shuayb *et al.*, 2009).

4.1 Young people as researchers

After conducting their AI interviews with their peers, young people were asked to provide feedback on their experience as researchers. Almost all of them enjoyed the experience of, *‘doing something different you do not normally do’*. Some of them particularly enjoyed talking to people about their school and local area. For example, one young researcher remarked that it was, *‘interesting to interview people and find out their opinions about something you really don’t talk about in school’*.

On the whole, young people understood the AI concept and its associated processes. They also seemed comfortable and enthusiastic in taking on the role of researcher. They were able to engage and understand the AI process. The only challenge reported by the young researchers was keeping interviewees focused on positive experiences. This was particularly the case in the urban school when young people were asked to describe what is special about their town. Interestingly, although interviewees struggled to answer this question, when they finally did, their responses identified many positive qualities about their local area.

A number of young people encountered some challenges in their role as an ‘interviewer’. These challenges are not specific to AI, but represent challenges

experienced within any participative research. The following points were noted by young people:

- **Note taking:** this was the most common difficulty reported by the young volunteers. Asking questions and writing up notes while also probing interviewees proved challenging. For example, one young person said: *'It was difficult asking the question and then, once they had answered, trying to bring up more conversation so that they do not get bored, but trying to write everything down as well'*. A few young people were concerned about whether their notes were too brief or too detailed and whether they had missed out any information.
- **Probing** during the interview for further information was reported as being *'difficult'* by a few young researchers, particularly when the interviewees failed to elaborate on a question asked.
- **Technical difficulties:** this was mainly related to difficulties in operating the tape-recorders.
- **Nervousness:** one of the young volunteers reported feeling *'shy'* during her first interview but felt more confident in conducting her second interview.
- **Time restrictions:** volunteers in Year 11 struggled to complete all their interviews on time because of the other school work demands.
- **Interviewing friends:** young people were asked to interview a friend first and then to select a young person who they did not know so well. On the whole, the young volunteers felt more comfortable interviewing people they knew less well and received more information from them. Interviews with friends tended to be more informal and less productive.

4.2 Analysing the data and designing a developmental plan

In the rural school, the interview data was summarised by the NFER research team and presented to the young volunteers to discuss and analyse as a group. In the urban school, only a small number of interviews were summarised by the research team as the majority of participants did not complete and return their interviews by the required deadline. As a result, participants presented their data at the workshop and the results were analysed by the whole group.

One of the aims of Workshop 2 was to devise a plan of action and design a PowerPoint presentation to present to LA staff in the final workshop. In both schools, young people developed a plan based on the positive practices and visions identified during the interviews.

Overall the data analysis and design stage went well. However, there were times during the session when the young people promoted their own views within discussions rather than considering the evidence from the interviews. The group often needed a steer to ensure that they understood the need to communicate the data objectively to a larger audience. It was the role of the NFER research team to ensure that this was the case.

4.3 Implementing change

Young volunteers in each school presented their plans for developing community cohesion to representatives from their school and LA. In the urban area, two representatives from the LA and two from a non-government agency (NGO) which focuses on promoting community cohesion attended the meeting. In the rural school, the meeting was attended by four representatives from the LA. It was also attended by the deputy head and another senior staff member at the school. In the rural school, the participants divided into two groups to discuss the findings; one focusing on community cohesion at the school and the other focusing on the local area.

The young people were enthusiastic and confident throughout these meetings. They were successful in communicating their ideas, plans and suggestions and delivered their presentations confidently, were insightful and professional and were commended by their audiences. The feedback from the young people themselves on their presentations was extremely positive. For example, one young researcher commented that, *'we were treated like we were equal to the adults'*, while another remarked: *'I enjoyed presenting to the council despite being nervous'*. For some, this was the most enjoyable part of the project, because they had been given an opportunity to communicate their findings to their LA.

In the rural school, several recommendations were taken up by the LA and the school. The school appointed a community cohesion officer to follow-up several of the young peoples' recommendations. However, this was not the case in the urban school. Although the local NGO involved in the project organised a meeting after Workshop 3 to discuss one of the young people's recommendations, none of the young volunteers attended.

There are several possible explanations for the limited response to young people's plan within the urban LA. These include the following:

- the LA in the urban area appeared to be primarily interested in the evaluation element of AI rather than the suggestions for further development
- the school representatives from the urban area were not members of the senior management team. While they were committed to pursuing the project's outcomes, they were not in a position to introduce change within the school. In contrast, the representatives from the rural school were senior staff (including the deputy head) and thus were in a stronger position to introduce change
- representatives from the urban school reported that their organisation had other priorities within the school, over and above that of community cohesion
- the majority of participants in the urban school were Year 11 students who had limited time to devote to pursuing the results of the AI.

4.4 Participants' feedback on AI

The overall AI process was evaluated by the young volunteers and staff from each case-study school, as well as by the NFER research team, in order to assess the effectiveness of using AI for understanding and developing community cohesion. In total, 11 young volunteers returned evaluation forms and four school staff members were interviewed. The evaluation revealed that AI was considered to be an effective tool to:

- help better understand the term community cohesion
- identify which aspects of community cohesion are important to young people
- discover young people's common goals
- generate enthusiasm.

Young people's feedback on the method revealed that they had a comprehensive understanding of the AI concept and process. They identified several strengths for adopting an AI approach in research. For example, one volunteer commented that, interviewees, *'did not go away from the interview feeling bad, they felt as though they were making a difference in a positive way'*. Another said that, *'it makes people feel good about what they are talking about'*. A number of participants observed how AI **provided a positive outlook** which they thought might be a **more effective method in bringing about change**. One student remarked that AI, *'prevented you receiving the same [negative] answers as much. Also the negatives are already known and usually nothing can be done about them so we learnt about things that could be changed'*. Another student commented on the constructive impact of positive questioning and remarked that, *'students had constructive ideas on how to improve their local area and school community'*.

Such feedback demonstrated that the AI process can be understood and implemented by young people (in this case the age of participants ranged from 12 to 17 years). Comments such as those outlined above indicate that the AI process inspired participants and created a positive environment in which ideas for future community cohesion activities were generated.

The young volunteers **gained valuable, transferable skills** such as interviewing, presentation and communication skills. Within the rural school in particular, a number of young people commented on the extent to which they felt empowered by participating in the research, and being part of a process that had resulted in definite outcomes. For example, a website was developed to advertise and discuss social activities and events for young people. In addition, a benches area for young people to congregate during school break times was created. Overall, young people's evaluations indicated that they felt **empowered** by the whole experience.

Conversely, just over half of young people who responded to the evaluation form identified limitations of the AI process including interviewees struggling to identify

positive things about community cohesion in their school/area and its failure to facilitate an examination of the (sometimes negative) issues contributing to the current state of community cohesion. This point is discussed further in the following section.

4.5 Key considerations for the use of AI

Our research highlighted the following four key questions for researchers to consider before embarking on this approach:

1. Is AI suitable for researching a controversial topic area?
2. Is AI suitable for topic areas where the subject under study is difficult to define?
3. Do participants have personal experiences and stories to convey about the area under investigation?
4. Is the study about good practice?
5. Are there sufficient funds in the research budget to accommodate a series of AI workshops?

1. Is AI suitable for researching a controversial topic area?

This pilot found that AI was able to challenge the traditional and mainly problematic research approach often adopted when investigating topics such as diversity, multiculturalism, communities and cohesion. By providing a new outlook on a potentially controversial subject, AI was able to avoid the stereotypical answers that a traditional inquiry often yields, as summarised within the following quotes from a staff member and young researcher:

If you asked questions in an negative way for a controversial topic [community cohesion] ... you would have probably provoked moans... so by focusing on what is good and what could be, it was much better. (School staff member)

AI, I thought prevented you receiving the same answers as much. Also the negatives are already known...so we learnt about things that could be changed. (Young researcher)

On the other hand, the positive approach to questioning prevented some participants from addressing problem areas. This was of particular importance to one of the LA representatives, who felt that the research had avoided taking responsibility for addressing racism. He remarked that:

For me, I am not sure how well the positive side worked because sometimes you needed to acknowledge the barriers before you can move on. The positives are helpful for drawing people's support and getting them involved, but the negatives have to be addressed first.

2. Is AI suitable for areas where the subject under study is difficult to define?

AI is a participative approach which aims to empower participants. However, the high degree of involvement required from participants in an AI, compels them to have a very clear understanding of the topic under investigation. This can be a challenge when involving people in investigating a new and poorly-defined topic. For instance, in this study, the majority of young participants were unfamiliar with the term ‘community cohesion’ and their perception of ‘community’ varied widely. Nonetheless, after discussing and exploring what the term meant to each one of them and presenting a definition of terms, young people largely succeeded in conducting interviews and probed for further information from interviewees. Hence it is important to consider the complexity of the topic when selecting the sample and particularly the age group of young people concerned.

3. Do participants have personal experiences and stories to convey about the area under investigation?

AI focuses on participants personal positive experiences, visions and wishes and deploys these images in planning future change. For this reason, a researcher using AI needs to consider carefully whether participants have had personal experiences relating to the topic of inquiry. While this condition can be easily satisfied when using AI in its original setting, i.e. organisational change, meeting this condition can be more challenging when deploying AI as a research tool. For example, in this study, young people in the rural school had had little experience of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This meant that the research was unable to address this area of community cohesion in this school.

4. Is the study about good practice?

The whole process of AI is based on identifying examples of good practice. But, as indicated in this study, AI would not be suitable for research focusing on negative social phenomena such as racism, poverty and bullying.

5. Are there sufficient funds in the research budget to accommodate a series of AI workshops?

Whilst the NFER research team were fortunate enough to be able to use school and NFER meeting facilities to accommodate the AI workshops, this may not always be possible in other research projects. Consideration needs to be given when deciding on venues for the training and the costs that this will entail over a series of workshop sessions.

5. Conclusions

Our pilot revealed many strengths and advantages of the AI methodology. While we acknowledge that our research is small in scale, there are a number of positive aspects of AI methodology that suggests it holds merit as a research technique.

Involving participants in conducting AI interview provides opportunities for meaningful participation and can contribute to the process of change as participants listen to the positive experiences and stories of their colleagues. Before embarking on AI interviews, our findings suggest that it is important for participants to have:

- a first-hand experience of the four different stages of AI including interviewing, data analyses and designing process
- piloted and understood all the questions they need to ask
- practiced probing and note-taking
- have the appropriate equipment to record their interviews
- explored how they will select their sample of interviewees
- discussed where to conduct the interview
- practiced how to respond to negative answers from their interviewees and keep the focus on the positive experiences
- explored at the session issues that might arise when interviewing friends.

Of course, some of the above are issues that are common to any project involving training non-researchers to conduct research.

Our pilot also highlighted the following important factors that need to be carefully considered when selecting a sample in an AI project. These include:

- **the need to commit to the AI process** across a period of time, which may mean that certain groups of young people are unable to sustain involvement
- **the age of participants** especially if they will be asked to conduct AI interviews and if the study is investigating a complex topic. Our research showed that Year 7 pupils were able to understand and follow the AI process with the appropriate training and guidance
- **language or other physical barriers** that might affect participants' ability to be fully involved in the AI process
- **the need for participants to have had personal experiences** of the topic under investigation
- the need for participants to feel **confident to conduct AI interviews and be interviewed** by their colleagues
- **commitment to change** of participants and stakeholders in order to follow through a development plan.

Furthermore, involving participants in the data analysis stage of an AI can facilitate the process of change and can promote a sense of ownership over the whole process and its outcome. One of the issues that our pilot highlighted in relation to participative data analysis is the importance of conducting the analysis workshop soon after participants complete their interviews in order to sustain interest and enthusiasm.

The role of the NFER team was considered important in order to facilitate the AI process and help drive momentum to bring about change. This involved the following tasks:

- helping the group of young people focus on the overall picture as well as the small issues highlighted by participants in order to communicate it to the larger audience
- ensuring that participants considered their findings as a whole and promoted the views of their interviewees over and above their own
- working closely with participants at all stages and ensuring that the workshops were arranged in close succession of each other in order to maintain enthusiasm and drive momentum
- having a pre-meeting with stakeholders in the absence of the young volunteers and before participants present their plans (during workshop 3). Such liaisons would ensure that stakeholders are aware of the proposed recommendations developed by the young people and allow stakeholders the opportunity to prepare their response to young people as well as consider ways in which they could help support the proposed ideas.

Overall, the main strengths of AI identified in this study included:

- providing a new outlook on a particular topic
- avoiding stereotypical answers
- empowering participants
- identifying good practice.

Furthermore, AI appears to be a useful approach when conducting research that focuses on one or more of the following:

- evaluating and developing initiatives in schools and local authorities
- organisational development
- identifying examples of good practice and suggesting ways forward
- projects wishing to record young people's voices
- participative research.

However, on the basis of our study, we suggest that AI is not suitable for research into problematic social phenomena (such as racism), or where participants have very limited experience of the topic (for example, to evaluate a new initiative). Also, it is worth highlighting that although AI partially serves as an evaluative technique, its main purpose is to introduce and implement change successfully. This takes it beyond the normal responsibility of research, requiring a commitment to implementation on behalf of all participants, especially those in positions of responsibility. It is possible to borrow elements from AI, particularly appreciative questions, and incorporate them

into a traditional evaluative research. In such cases, researchers need to acknowledge that they have not implemented an AI, but only borrowed elements of it.

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