Looking for the ‘bigger picture’: An application of the appreciative inquiry method in Renfrewshire Council for Voluntary Services

Daune West\textsuperscript{a,\*}, Liz Thomas\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Information Systems Group, School of Computing, University of Paisley, Paisley PA1 2BE, UK
\textsuperscript{b}Renfrewshire Council for Voluntary Services, The Wynd Centre, 6, School Wynd, Paisley PA1 2DB, UK

Abstract

Renfrewshire Council for Voluntary Services (RCVS) is involved in a large-scale project to investigate and develop a wireless network in Paisley and its environs. This exciting project has implications for many different actors and stakeholders, not the least, RCVS itself as its members contemplate its future possible practices, processes and services that a successful wireless network may enable. Seeing connections, possibilities, and potential developments as well as keeping an eye on the on-going purpose and objectives of RCVS are challenging tasks.

This situation led to the collaboration between a member of RCVS and an Information Systems academic from the University of Paisley. The purpose of their collaboration was to try and ensure that the ‘bigger picture’ of RCVS and its future, given the wireless project, did not get ‘lost’ in the detail of the technological project. To this end, an analysis of the RCVS system, as understood by its Chief Executive, was undertaken. In this paper we describe the investigative process adopted which uses a method of inquiry which draws heavily upon the work of Vickers [(1965). \textit{The art of judgement: A study of policy making}. London: Chapman and Hall] and Checkland [(1981). \textit{Systems thinking, systems practice}. Chichester: Wiley], Checkland and Holwell [(1998). \textit{Information, systems and information systems: Making sense of the field}. Chichester: Wiley] and Checkland and Scholes [(1990). \textit{Soft systems methodology in action}. Chichester: Wiley].

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 141 848 3318; fax: +44 141 848 3542.
E-mail address: west-ci0@paisley.ac.uk (D. West).

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1. Introduction

In Spring 2004, a number of meetings were set up between members of staff from the Renfrewshire Council for Voluntary Services (RCVS) and the University of Paisley to discuss collaboration on an exciting project concerning the implementation of a wireless network in the town of Paisley. RCVS had begun to experiment with wireless applications and teaming up with local academics offered the opportunity to develop applications and technical know-how amongst staff from both institutions, to join forces to apply for local and national funding for research and development, as well as to encourage students to participate in live projects and thereby gain valuable practical experience, and possibly consider the voluntary sector as a potential job market on graduation. Academics at the meeting came from Schools of physics, electrical engineering, computing, business, and information systems. Participants from RCVS included IT personnel and the RCVS’s Chief Executive.

During one meeting the Chief Executive commented that RCVS was involved in many interesting and exciting projects that concerned the use of IT and whilst she felt intuitively that all these developments were part of some ‘whole picture’, she was finding it more difficult to keep the whole picture in mind and see the ‘connections’. Discussing this difficulty it was suggested that one aspect of the collaboration between academics and RCVS that might be valuable was the exploration of this ‘whole’ or ‘bigger picture’. The Chief Executive was mindful that she was required to present this ‘picture’ in various forms (i.e. annual strategy documents) and so it was likely that any help in this area would be useful. Consequently, it was arranged that over the next few months the Chief Executive and an academic who had previously undertaken research into knowledge elicitation would work together to explore and, if possible, formulate a description of this ‘whole picture’.

In the rest of this paper, first we give a brief introduction to RCVS as the organisational context in which the studies were undertaken. We then give an overview of the Appreciative Inquiry Method (AIM) before describing its use in RCVS. In Section 4, we describe the method’s use and offer comments from both collaborators to try and illustrate the process of the investigation. These comments give an insight into both the methodological issues raised as well as the results of the thinking and discussion the investigation promoted. Finally, we offer a reflection on the experience, pointing out lessons and ‘results’ of the investigation.

2. The organisational context—RCVS

RCVS was set up in January 2000 to service the needs of Renfrewshire’s voluntary and community sector. It acts as an umbrella group at a local level but participates in a wider network
at both regional and national levels. RCVS is located in Paisley and interacts with over 300 organisations which vary from small self-help groups to branches of major national charities. RCVS’s mission statement is as follows:

We exist to give assistance to voluntary and community sector organisations seeking to improve the quality of life of all citizens of Renfrewshire. (http://www.rcvsweb.co.uk/)

Under this mission, RCVS’s services are wide and varied: they help to set up new groups, they facilitate networking between members and other agencies, they act as a strong ‘voice’ in the sector, they liaise with the Local Authority and partners on the Community Plan and promote community learning initiatives by bringing together and working in conjunction with other agencies. In Scottish Executive terminology RCVS are involved in ‘promoting and floating’ voluntary sector organisations and enabling ‘effective and efficient’ services therein.

3. The method of inquiry—AIM

AIM was designed as an approach to eliciting human expertise prior to the development of computer-based expert systems (West, 1991). Many methods of eliciting human expertise were described in the literature but most seemed to be based on extracting what might be referred to as tangible, rule-based descriptions of a domain. By comparison, AIM was developed on the premise that expertise is a uniquely human phenomenon: it can be seen as the result of ‘facts’ and ‘rules’ that have been put into practice and so is experiential, often tacit; it may be particular to an individual or group, it can be based upon intuition and hunches; furthermore, attempts to make it explicit can sometimes distort it (West, 1990, 1992).

The description of human expertise adopted as the underlying position for AIM draws upon the concept of appreciation put forward by Vickers (1965) and attempts to offer a way of ‘tapping into’ the appreciative setting of some individual, or group. This process is operationalised through a form of some of the modelling techniques used in Soft Systems Methodology (e.g. Checkland, 1981; Checkland & Scholes, 1990; Checkland & Howell, 1998), which Checkland and Casar (1986, p. 4) claim can be described as “an operationalisation of the process Vickers calls ‘appreciation’.”

The approach referred to here as AIM was developed through a number of action research studies (e.g. West, 1991; West & Stansfield, 2001). The resulting process is one in which emphasis is placed on learning about and understanding human expertise through a process of inquiry rather than trying to implement a process that extracts, elicits, acquires or mines human expertise (all popular terminology in the knowledge elicitation literature). A full description of AIM can be found in West (1995) but a brief overview is given below.

3.1. Overview of AIM

Fig. 1 illustrates the different phases of the process of inquiry facilitated by the use of AIM. Experience of talking to busy ‘experts’ suggested that several shorter meetings represented a more acceptable format to those involved than a single ‘long haul’ session. An important feature of AIM is that the conversation engendered between ‘expert’ and analyst by the approach provides
sufficient detailed descriptions of aspects of the situation under exploration to allow the analyst to work on the modelling phases of the approach away from the meeting.

In Phase I an area for focus needs to be identified and agreed (something which, in itself, can lead to debate!). In some respects this process is defining the scope of the study. The boundary it imposes, however, should not be seen as set: it may be revisited and redrawn at any time if it is felt that it would be beneficial to do so. Once an area is named and selected the discussion of this area is set around the production of a type of diagram we call a ‘systems map’. Although the expert is shown the kind of diagram to be worked towards, experience has shown that the conventions of this type of diagram do not need to be insisted upon too strictly: the resulting diagram merely needs to represent different themes relevant to, or parts of, the area of focus.

The objective of Phase II is to explore each of the themes of the systems map in more detail. To do this, questions relating to the CATWOE elements of SSM (Bergvall-Kåreborn, Mirijamdotter, & Basden, 2004; Smyth & Checkland, 1976) are used to get the expert to describe the core of each theme or area of the map. In essence, we are trying to describe the different parts of the map as processes so that we can model them systematically (through the vehicle of systems descriptions in the format of Root Definitions and Conceptual Models). These processes are identified and

![Overview of AIM](Source: West, 1995, Fig. 7.3).
explained by the expert as being meaningful to the situation under investigation and so we begin to view them as purposeful human activities. We are then in a position to use the systems models as a vehicle for asking more detailed questions about the activities identified within the models and hence explore someone’s understanding of a situation and/or the concepts therein. This is the process of Phase III.

4. The process of using AIM in RCVS

Prior to the first use of AIM the two collaborators had met to discuss the way in which the investigation would be conducted. The academic partner had described her work in information systems analysis and knowledge elicitation and offered a brief overview of her ‘appreciative setting’ as far as inquiry was concerned, explaining her interest in interpretive systems modelling and action research. Whilst at times finding the academic language a little constraining, the organisational collaborator had similar interests in action research as a mode of inquiry and was interested to see what alternatives to inquiry undertaken through means such as surveys and questionnaires had to offer. It was agreed that the collaboration would serve several purposes: first, if successful it would help to tease out and make explicit the ‘bigger picture’ which could be a valuable tool in the future development of RCVS activities. Second, it would enable further reflection on the use of AIM to help unravel and make sense of complex situations.

Having talked through these different issues and having discussed the mechanics of AIM, the first of three meetings was organised between the two collaborators. The meetings took place over a three month period with each focussing on a phase of AIM. The meetings were held at the client’s premises and lasted between 2 and 3 hours each.

In the following sections, we have tried to represent the process of the meetings as clearly and accurately as possible given the restrictions of the conference paper format. To this end we present an overall description of the different phases of the inquiry and then offer comments, in the form of ‘asides’, from the two collaborators who are identified by their initials: [DW] and {LT}.

4.1. Meeting 1

Having talked about the use of AIM briefly in the preliminary discussions, LT had then spent some time thinking about the issue to be placed at the centre of the systems map and thereby provide the focus of discussion. She felt the most appropriate way forward was to use, what for her (as Chief Executive), lay at the heart of RCVS, namely ‘Communication and Connections’. After having written this in the centre of the page she suggested that DW take over the process of drawing the map.

[DW: “This departs from the usual requirement in AIM where it has been argued that it is important for the ‘domain expert’ to draw their own maps so that it is their language and structuring of the situation that is recorded and not the interpretations of the outsider that are preserved. Q—how far did my own ‘readinesses’ dictate what was recorded here?”]

{LT: “I think I am a ‘words’ person as opposed to a ‘pictures’ person and I felt that it would be easier for me to talk and someone else to put the pictures in place; so rather than worry about
the drawing I could concentrate on what I was thinking and saying. This probably gave me more scope to expand my thinking. I don’t think I’m a particularly logical thinker and it’s easy for me to go off in tangents but this approach made me come back.”}'

The discussion produced four separate but related systems maps, one of which is reproduced in all ‘its mess’ for illustration (Fig. 2).

[DW: “Trying to understand what RCVS is and what Liz does and how it all fits together is an enormous task; so much of how things are and work seem to be held in Liz’s head: she just ‘knows’ how things work and fit together, what their implications are and who to talk to in a given situation. She makes connections all the time. The maps helped by providing some structure for the discussion”].
{LT: “I probably need to be more disciplined in my thinking; I tend not to be so it was a good opportunity for me to start to look at the various strands of activities we do in a more structured way.”}

4.2. Meeting 2

At the beginning of the second meeting the maps from the previous session were reviewed and it was decided that a fruitful place to focus was on the idea of ‘widening horizons’. The other points
in this bubble seemed to be related and could even be seen as contributing to the idea of ‘widening horizons’. The CATWOE questions from Phase II of AIM were then used as a way of focussing in on the meaning, purpose and intentions behind the selected statement.

After the meeting DW worked with the answers to the CATWOE questions as illustrated in Fig. 3 to construct a description of the process that LT described as being all about ‘widening horizons’. This description was developed, through numerous iterations, in the format of a Root Definition and is reproduced below:

A RCVS owned and manned system to bring together (appropriate) people with ideas and knowledge of different fields so as to create an environment (in a meaningful format for those involved) in which these people can network and learn about each others’ ideas and knowledge so that they may develop new ideas and knowledge themselves that they may be able to use to advantage in their own fields.

The description of the activity surrounding the idea of ‘widening horizons’ was then developed in a model which could illustrate the different activities necessary in order to undertake the named activity. This model took the form of a Conceptual Model and the original is shown in Fig. 4.
The CATWOE questions, given their domain-independent nature, can be hard work but as long as the person asking the questions has a clear understanding of their purpose in helping to build a description of purposeful human activity they provide an invaluable structure and ‘handrail’ for asking pertinent questions. It is important to remember that the questions are asked solely to build up a list of suitable components that will allow the development of a description of an specific activity: by means of these questions, what we are trying to do is specify (i) the activity (tackled through CATWOE elements: T, A, and C), (ii) its purpose (tackled through CATWOE element: W), and (iii) its boundary and environment (tackled through CATWOE elements: O and E), all being achieved through the language of our
client. The Root Definition is clumsy grammatically but it seemed sensible to try and make it as explicit as possible for LT to follow and discuss.”

{LT: “I had been thinking about what we do and thinking about how we ‘widen horizons’ but I had not articulated my thinking. The questions asked were helpful in making me structure my thinking and making it explicit. One of the issues here is that we talk about this all the time in our sector. For example, we talk about ‘capacity building’, we talk about ‘community engagement’ or ‘widen horizons’—we use some words on a fairly regular basis which are not clearly defined: we assume that we all agree on their meaning but don’t always check that we do. We also cluster things together under words because it’s a best option description at the time. So this process did not let me get away with this. I had to start being a bit more disciplined in my thinking and not just say the words.”}

4.3. Meeting 3

DW took the two models that resulted from Phase II and used them to produce an agenda that could be used to structure the discussion in the third meeting. The different activities in the conceptual model generated the following discussion which is recorded in the format outlined in Fig. 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>DW?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identify different personal formats of learning together</td>
<td>y.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Decide on meaningful format of learning together</td>
<td>n.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Select appropriate people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Have an idea about appropriateness of people for learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Identify people with skills, tasks, in different diets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Form together appropriate people in some small groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Monitor 1-7</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Have criterion for judging progress difficulty, speed</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Take control action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5. Recording the discussion around activities in the Conceptual Model.
5. Reflection and learning points

Rather than present conclusions to this paper it seems more appropriate to pull out points of reflection and learning. These points are offered below:

5.1. About RCVS and the wireless project

The study has resulted in several different types of outcome for RCVS:

(i) A clear articulation for RCVS’ Chief Executive of how she sees the organisation and its activities at this moment in time.

(ii) The systems map from Phase I has been developed and is the basis of the Business/Development Plan for the organisation for 2004–2006. This plan will be used in many different ways, such as assisting RCVS to apply for future funding (e.g. an application for Lottery funding to support development of the wireless network has already been made), as evidence of impact for past activity, and as a basis for reassessment for RCVS’ ‘Investors in People’ award.

(iii) An understanding of the benefits of spending time think about the nature of the organisation. Further collaborative activities between RCVS and the University are planned to encourage this form of organisational learning.

5.2. About AIM as a method of inquiry

An important and recurring lesson learnt with every application of AIM is that it is not SSM. There is no attempt to engender a debate that will lead to a rethinking of positions and activities; there is no agenda for the introduction of change, whether of structures, process or attitudes. Instead, the models from SSM are used to help construct clear descriptions of purposeful human activity of some complex and often ‘hard-to-describe’ situations and activities. The aim is to promote reflection in an individual who already knows about the domain but because of its complex nature (including implicit, tacit, experiential, intuitive, personal, etc. elements), it has a
‘characteristic quality of non-communicability’ (Baumard, 1999, p. 23). It may be that the individual is not even conscious of what they know and think. The intended result of an application of AIM is an increased understanding of the domain and an enhanced ability to explain it to others. AIM does not provide any tools or techniques to go further than to facilitate this inquiry process (i.e. we are not attempting to ‘engineer’ any human activity system (Checkland, 1981, p. 125)): AIM seems to be a means of operating ‘an inquiring system which facilitates learning ... [as] a way of providing the infrastructure to promote appreciation of a domain of expertise’ (West, 1991, p. 276).

5.3. About the process of using AIM

In RCVS, where the environment is highly complex and where we have financial, social and environmental constraints as well as many forms of legal issues to address, it is vital that we have an understanding of the system before we start to find solutions to its problems and exploit its opportunities through Information Technology. Our systems analysis can only move towards an understanding of what information systems are required in order to support the current and potential organisation but when we deal with an organisation like RCVS, which is all about ‘making connections’ (a dynamic process) and communication, it is difficult to establish a picture of the current state of affairs. It is unlikely that making sense of the organisation is a one-off activity but instead needs to be an on-going process of appreciation and learning so as to provide opportunities not only for moving forward but for moving forward productively (according to criteria set at any one time by the organisation). The example given above of the use of AIM illustrates a way of putting into practice a process that focuses on learning about and appreciating a situation as a precursor to defining the problem situation, and then considering potential ‘solutions’. The difference between this and a more traditional computer-based systems analysis approach is illustrated in Fig. 6.

![Fig. 6. ‘Problem-solving’ versus ‘problem-appreciating’ modes of inquiry.](image-url)
5.4. About information systems analysis in general

It is understood that senior management play an important role in the development of technology-based information systems and that a lack of understanding of IT and its implications is just one of the many reasons why so many IT projects fail (Ewusi-Mensah, 1997). In addition to a lack of IT knowledge, it is proposed here that a lack of a clear view of the system to be served by the IT-based information system and an ability to communicate this view seems to be equally undesirable but is not uncommon in dynamic organisations like RCVS. Our systems analysis approaches need to facilitate this process of learning about the system to be served by the technology, rather than focus upon design and implementation issues. This is not a new idea. For example, Checkland and Scholes explained this situation in 1990:

Thus if we wish to create an ‘information system’ in the exact sense of the phrase, we must first understand how the people in the situation conceptualize their world. We must find out the meanings they attribute to their perceptions of the world and hence understand which action in the world they regard as sensible purposeful action, and why. (pp. 55–56)

Given the ease by which technology can now be put in place it seems worthwhile re-emphasising this point. Technical problems may still be influencing the application of wireless technology but the opportunities it already offers in allowing us to work differently and the potential it has to create new conceptualisations of our world suggest that understanding where we are, or where we could be, given technology, remains an important issue to address in information systems analysis.

References

RCVS website http://www.rcvsweb.co.uk/ (accessed 14/01/05).


Daune West is a Senior Lecturer In Information Systems at the University of Paisley. She holds a B.A.(Hons) in Classical Studies and an M.A. in Classics from the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and a PgDIS and PhD in Information Systems from Portsmouth Polytechnic. Her PhD concerned an investigation into the development of a subjective approach to knowledge elicitation for the design of expert systems. Her current research interests include the use of systems concepts and tools in the appreciation, definition and development of information systems, action research as a vehicle for information systems research, the exploration of an interpretive model of organisation based upon Vickers’ concept of ‘relationship-maintenance’ and the role and form of reflective practice for the information systems professional.