

# Shrek, Saunders and the Onion Myth: Using Myths, Metaphors and Storytelling

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**Abstract:** Do we know our (research) onions? Onions have layers, as researchers we need to peel the research onion to its core, to uncover layers of meaning which enable us to understand the phenomenon we are seeking to understand. The metaphor of the onion, immortalized by Shrek (amongst others) and in our research world by Saunders, is well known. This paper takes the layers of the onion as a metaphor for collecting and making meaning from visual/ verbal metaphors, and stories. Research methods, based on the collection of stories, can sometimes be perceived as tangential or superfluous (Kendall J and Kendall K, 2012). Additionally, research using story telling often falls into three specific domains 1) is the story an accurate portrayal of all the events? 2) is the story an accurate account of what was experienced by the actors? 3) Is the story a driver for change and improvement?

This research explores all three domains, adapting Campbells' (1964) and Youngs' (2004) typology of myths. Our Sphere Model (Farquharson L, Sinha T, Clarke S, 2018) provides a canvas to capture verbal and visual stories from those experiencing and leading change within Higher Education. The stories are captured through populating the Sphere canvas, through focus groups (camp fires), interviews (testimony) and artefacts such as postcards and graphic maps. We seek to capture the following myth descriptions of describe, explain, validate and direct (Young, 2004) to create a typography of organisational stories. (Adapted from Kendall J and Kendall K, 2012). We will be taking a positive psychology view of this work, to learn from what works as opposed to what hinders (deficit approach). The outcome of the paper shows how we will move this research method forward.

**Keywords:** Appreciative Inquiry, Organisational Change, World café, Story-telling, Participative action based research.

## 1. Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to explain and provide the context for the development of a refreshed model to support effective organizational change within a Higher Education Institution (HEI). The 'Sphere Model' for supporting organizational change within Higher Education (HE), is based on an appreciative inquiry approach to analyse the impact of change on staff and leadership within HE, and to codify the key drivers of what leads to a 'good day in Higher Education', in the context of change management.

Organisational change can be characterized in several ways.

1 By exploring the factors driving the change, or

2 Exploring how the change comes about, be it emergent or planned change (Bamford and Forrester, 2003).

This paper focuses on the later, how to design, develop and lead effective, planned changed within HE. Whilst there is a vast array of literature, providing theoretical underpinning of the many theories and change models, it has been recognized that existing models of change are not readily adaptable for application with Higher Education (Gornitzka, 1999). There are a number of factors which are helpful when contextualising for the HE sector, one of these is

the distribution of power and authority, which in HEI is often distributed across a number of areas.

If we consider the founding principle of appreciative research or inquiry (AI), we look to what already works within an organization rather than focusing on the problem. This radical shift from deficit-based approaches to change management, to an appreciative-based approach to change, supports the discovery and the narration of the organization's 'life-giving- stories' (Cooperider and Srivastva 1987). Appreciative Inquiry is a positive approach which turns the attention to what is working well within an organisation, and enables the researcher to codify these strengths and build on them. This is not to say the deficit based / problem solving approach is not valid. The reductionist view of research, indeed the essence of classic scientific method has many benefits. However, for this work for the AI approach is deemed more appropriate, to determine 'what helps make a great / good day within an HEI undergoing change'. The 4D model (Cooperrider and Whitney, 1999) of conducting an appreciative inquiry will be adapted. Using a participatory action-based research method, this has been tested using a 'World Café' type event. The 4D model is a learning cycle, in conjunction with the world café approach, participants are invited to take part in listening and building on colleagues' stories, the DISCOVERY phase presents what is going well.

This strengths based approach has also been championed by Marcus Buckingham. Participants find they have more in common than expected, which builds the foundations for the next stage of the cycle – DREAM. This is where participants co create their desired future, thinking of new scenarios and outcomes. Participants then DESIGN the new propositions, as attractively as possible, and enact the propositions in the DESTINY phase.

## **2. Appreciative Inquiry: The 4D Model**

The 4 D Model

1. Discovery
2. Dream
3. Design
4. Destiny

### **2.1 Discovery – unpeeling the first layer.**

The Discovery stage of the model provides the impetus to ask an affirmatively framed question to capture narratives, stories (myths and legend), to begin the process of unpeeling of the first layers of the onion. What is happening in HE context for staff that works, what is already bringing life to the organization and as we continue to peel these layers and start to dream what could be, we will be taking the first steps to designing the Sphere model for change in Higher Education.

### **World Café – Transformational Change within an HEI context**

World Café used as a focus group to gain insight from staff employed in a variety of roles from across a number of HEIs. The design of the café will be explained here the data and research outcomes will be published in the final paper. The theme of the World Café (WC), was 'transformational change' within a HEI context, and invited a number of staff involved in supporting change from across a number of institutions to attend and take part in an exploration of their experiences of change within HE. One of the questions was positively framed; '**what happens on a great day in higher education?**' The remaining questions were more traditional and deficit based, for example, 'what are the problems you encounter...?' Around 45 people took part and were asked to participate in a question set by each table host, and after a period of time to move to another table, until they had visited and contributed to the discussion on each table.

The World Café method is flexible and can be adapted in order to facilitate a large group dialogue. The authors will draw on seven integrated design principles (Brown and Isaacs, 2005).

1. Set the context, the reason for bringing people together
2. Create a hospitable space, and welcome
3. Small group rounds, supported by a table host and a central time keeper
4. Each round is prefixed by a question, set by or called out by the table host
5. Harvesting and sharing of insights, each group/table will feedback key thoughts or results.
6. Listening together for Patterns and Insights
7. Share collective discoveries.

The full data collection and analysis will be undertaken after a number of other similar events have taken place. The initial outcomes and reaction to the question for the majority of participants immediately initiated storytelling and descriptive recounting of what happened on a good day. This led to the sharing of specific examples of projects, initiatives and organizational norms, ceremonies and community activity which were considered to be a force for good.

The discoveries could be themed as follows: -

- activity which brought the staff and students together, engendered a sense of fulfilment to staff
- responding to a positively framed question tended to increase the focus on the student outcomes rather than the impact of change activity on staff;
- face to face interaction often resulted in a good result in terms of getting other staff to 'buy-in' to changes;
- a day free of minor annoyances was productive and conducive to high stake conversations.

The Dream phase begins, once the organisation has collected data and discovers what "gives life", what is the best of what is (Cooperrider, Stavros, Whitney, 2008), in this case, what is a good day in Higher Education. Story telling based on what is giving life, is encouraged to support organisational efforts towards doing more of what is already working. Appreciative inquiry and storytelling can counteract the adversarial undercurrents often presenting in Higher Education (Farquharson, Clarke, Diaz and Collins, 2016). Sharing affirmative stories can create a compelling vision and sense of community within organizations. This aligns with Young's approach to use story telling as a method of directing action (2004).

#### **4 Designing our Research Method**

Our developmental research method will be described using Saunders et al (2007) Research Onion. Leading us through the stages to develop an experimental yet robust approach to our research method.

The stages of the research method development include: Philosophy, approach, strategy, time horizon and data collection method.

Outlining the research philosophy for the study is the sharing of beliefs underpinning the researchers' view of the nature of reality being studied. This enables the assumptions made by the researchers to be made visible. The ontological framework leading this research falls into the 'interpretivism and constructionism' view meaning that the phenomena being studied and meaning derived is created by each researcher / observer / group. The use of storytelling, visual maps, metaphors and using these methods to explore transformation in

higher education is rich with possibilities. We do not make assumptions that we all have the same view of reality rather that examining our different interpretations and the nuances of our participants provides a rich knowledge landscape from different perspectives.

Our research approach is 'deductive' in that we are using stories and metaphors of specific transformation in Higher Education to inform our general model for positive transformation in Higher Education. We are using the business model canvas (Osterwalder and Pigneur, 2010) as our starting point / theoretical base; we are looking for patterns and testing our ideas from the research data gathered. We are gathering qualitative data from stories collection, campfires (focus groups) and visual story boards.

Our research strategy is participatory action-based research, as a practical approach drawing on the communities of practices of the researchers. In this endeavor we are observing and collecting stories of good practice of transformation in Higher education in order to inform our Sphere model, which aims to share good practice across the sector, through the communities of practices who have contributed to building the model. This form of research is practical and useful for practitioners, in order for them to observe, reflect and inform their professional practice (Wiles et al, 2011).

The research process is built around a 'multi method' (Saunders et al, 2007) in that a wide selection of methods are used as and when appropriate (Bryman, 2012). The multi method approach enables flexibility and emergence of multiple data sets, which are then analysed using qualitative or quantitative techniques, depending on the validity and usefulness of the data set.

The time horizon for this work is longitudinal, historical experiences and stories will be collected, and waypoints will be added over the time of the study to show evolution and the results of the sphere model on practice. This fits well with the idea of the researcher as reflective practitioner.

Data collection is a key facet of the process; validity and reliability of the results are an important requisite for high quality research outputs. The primary data will be collected through the following mechanisms – world café events, camp fire focus groups, testimonies and interviews, and visual artefacts. (Flick, 2011). Our secondary data is collected from our systematic literature review.

Our research design concludes with the population of our sphere framework, to test our assumptions and gather evidence as to the usefulness of our approach to facilitate positive transformation in Higher Education. The choices here relate to whether our research design is explanatory, descriptive and exploratory. The outputs will be descriptive in this phase, leading to further research where we can explain the phenomenon under investigation. Using our preferred method of Appreciative Inquiry we will use the following framework as our research methodology.

<p><b>4 Destiny:</b></p> <p>Actioning the scenarios, following reality checks and building the sphere model to enable appreciative inquiry diagnostics. Testing and developing our propositions.</p>	<p><b>1 Discovery:</b></p> <p>Participants start to tell their stories, exploring their current situation regarding transformation in their HEI. Asking 'what does a great day in Higher Education look like?' Surfacing what is working well. Collecting the data and populating the sphere model through storyboards, camp fires (focus groups), HEI scripts</p>
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	(interviews), visual artefacts (posters, postcards) and the world café.
<b>3 Design:</b>  Developing scenarios for the future, based on metaphors and peeling the layers of the HE onion.	<b>2 Dream:</b>  HOW we capture the Visioning – even better if.... The camp fire approach – focus groups and interviews, building the community of practice knowledge landscape of what HE could and should be. Developing stories, narratives and story boards of a ‘perfect day in HE’.

### 5 Applying the approach to 'Leading change in Higher Education'

The theoretical base of operational excellence and lean were used to develop our framework for leading change in higher education. The framework shows the key dimensions needed to help HEIs cope with and embed a culture of continuous improvement. Stronger foundations are needed for HEIs, the environment in the UK is challenging, with funding, student numbers, the Teaching Excellence Framework, the National Student Survey driving Strategic Change within the sector. However, we argue that for change to be positive and sustainable, the foundations for HEIs in terms of People, Process and Culture need to be explored and explicitly stated. The appreciative inquiry:-

- 1) is the story an accurate portrayal of all the events?
- 2) is the story an accurate account of what was experienced by the actors?
- 3) Is the story a driver for change and improvement?

Whether you are an academic or part of a professional services team, it appears from our study that the explicit expectations for different roles are not available. We have generic job descriptions for academic and professional services roles, however, much of the work is implicit and not specifically outlined. From our work, we have developed the following propositions to act as foundations for the model:

- 1 Higher Education benefits from embedding continuous improvement within the organisational DNA
- 2 the lenses of people, process and culture are helpful constructs in developing our HEI model canvas
- 3 successful change management and improvement interventions include aspects of positive psychology, drawing on emotions, behaviours and sense of well being.
- 4 successful improvement methodologies are built on the following theoretical bases: systems thinking, positive psychology, change and project management, quality management, lean and six sigma, leadership and followship, performance measures, creativity and problem solving.
- 5 specific improvement methodologies do not exist explicitly for the Higher Education Sector.
- 6 the authors believe the following are missing from current improvement and change methodologies in HE: reward and recognition, gender differences, mental load, standard work and operating guidelines, RACI (responsibility, accountability, consult, inform) silos between academics and professional services.
- 7 we acknowledge the development of lean - manufacturing to service to public to higher education which is predominantly a knowledge based organisation - individualistic vs teams approach to lean and continuous improvement. Drawing on the need for a humanistic

approach to improvement - respect for people, continuous improvement and eradication of waste. Sense making and creating meaning.

Improvement methods, often adapted within Higher Education, such as, classical forms of lean has tended to focus on the 'hard' aspects of process, eradication of waste and team based problem solving. There is a feeling in the lean literature that the focus on change management and the 'softer skills' of leadership, negotiation, reward and recognition and emotions need to become more prominent.

Our proposed framework is shown below: SPHERE MODEL

**People:** capability, continuity, communications, kindness, gender, perceptions, leadership and followship

**People & Process:** Overburden, encouraging more of what already works

**Culture:** Commitment, credibility, continuous improvement, day to day focus on internal organization as opposed to the customer experience.

**People & Culture:** Gender, engagement, power and behaviour

**Process:** Consistency, unevenness, creativity, control, foundations,

**Process and Culture:** Waste reduction (classic and service)

**People process and culture:** Impact, RACI, well-being, humanization, celebration.

## 5.2 Discussion

The paper has outlined our preliminary research design using Appreciative Inquiry as its core. The paper is using this method to explore the propositions of a sphere model – which is being developed to provide a robust framework for enabling strategic transformation and continuous improvement with Higher Education. The sphere model will be tested and scrutinised using Merediths' (1998) 'Theory Testing' approach. Analysing impact of and on staff and leadership within Higher Education. The Sphere model seeks to uncover the layers of meaning in order to understand the phenomenon of transformation in Higher Education. This is in order to embed good practice across the sector. The development of the research design is iterative, using the appreciative inquiry model and systems thinking to explore complex, dynamic and fast moving problematical situations.

The core of story-telling, metaphors, myths and hero(ines) are a primary tool for data gathering and analysis. The data analysis of stories using grounded theory and the identification of themes will provide confirmation (or otherwise) for the propositions outlined above. The enabling technology for the capturing of the data includes recording, rich pictures, mindmap notes, artefacts in terms of post its and world café outputs. Using CATWOE to explore different world views and key relationships within the phenomenon under investigation. This also explore the interpersonal skills needed within our leadership teams and colleagues for meaningful and positive transformation in higher education.

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