Evidence-Based Storytelling Handout

In an era of accountability and reporting, effectively communicating a coherent narrative of quality assurance is vital for the future of higher education. We have to become better at communicating our work to various audiences by connecting multiple points of evidence. Several efforts are underway to support institutions in this process including the Excellence in Assessment Designation, NILOA's Transparency Framework (2011), evidence-based storytelling, analysis of organizational digital narratives, and data visualization.

The Excellence in Assessment (EIA) program recognizes institutions for their efforts in intentional integration of institution-level learning outcomes assessment. However, in reviewing applications, many institutions struggled with presenting a cohesive and concise narrative regarding their institution-level assessment process. Many applicants defaulted to providing lists of various disconnected activities without connecting or aligning the activities, or describing and explaining the relationships between the various parts. It is not enough to say that an institution is engaged in a particular practice without articulating **why that practice is important within that context.** http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eiadesignation.html

The NILOA Transparency Framework (2011) is intended to help institutions evaluate the extent to which they are making evidence of student learning readily accessible and potentially useful and meaningful to various audiences in an online environment. It provides six components, pulled from a review of over 2,000 institutional websites. http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/TransparencyFramework.htm

Evidence-based storytelling is based on Toulmin's (2003) model of argumentation where evidence offered in support of a claim is bolstered by a warrant. We define evidence-based storytelling as: Evidence of student learning that is used in **support of claims or arguments** about **improvement and accountability** told through **stories** to **persuade a specific audience** (Jankowski, 2019). It includes explication of why we think that what we are doing at our institution, with the students we serve, will lead to enhanced student learning—why this and not something else?

As with all narratives, storytellers can emphasize certain messages to a particular audience in a variety of formats whether oral, written, or visual. With digital narratives, technology assists with the customization of narratives for different audiences. Digital narratives include personal stories created through videos, images, text, and audio, which may be displayed in a variety of media. The themes of the narratives can be intentional, or can emerge from several messages across several webpages. Personal narratives emerge from individuals, but organizations can also create narratives that define and describe the identity of the organization. **Organizational digital narratives** are a special case of "digital narratives" in which the story being told is not of an individual, but of an organization – a presentation of an institution that represents multiple voices. That presentation may be tightly controlled, such that the story portrayed is centralized and unified, or the story may be loosely controlled with many voices and perspectives contributing to the whole. In a review of our stories of student learning, it is important to examine the entirety of the narrative including how various mediums and sources reinforce or counter existing reports and narratives.
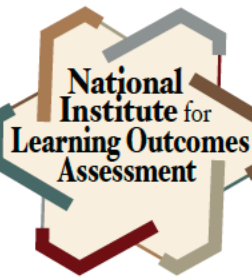
Data Visualization provides a research driven approach to reimagining the presentation of data within a larger narrative through thinking intentionally about the best means through which to convey data as a tool in enhancing communication (Evergreen, 2017). High impact data visualizations can enhance users understanding and experience in interacting with and making sense of data to inform practice, support a narrative, or make a compelling argument to target audiences.

Why Storytelling?

In a piece in *Change,* Lee Shulman (2007) posits that accounting is a form of narrative, and argues that counting without narrative is meaningless. The role of an institution is to give an account on the contribution to the education of its students. Storytelling internal to an organization can bolster collective identity and shift organizational culture, create new ways to think about practice, and create space for active learning and organizational memory (Abrahamson, 1998; Butcher, 2006; Feldman, 1990; Whyte & Ralake, 2013). A good story is easy to read, introduces a problem, and shares how the problem was solved, highlighting the role of the institution in addressing the problem. **We need context and a story, because evidence gives stories substance, but stories give evidence meaning.** Our stories can be our context, our histories, our missions, our organizational saga, it is how we see the world and why we do what we do.
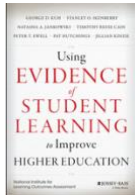
For additional information, resources, and approaches related to reporting as communication and narrative, see Chapter 10 by Natasha Jankowski and Timothy Reese Cain on moving "From Compliance Reporting to Effective Communication: Assessment and Transparency" in the book *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*.
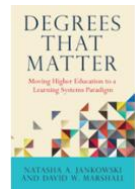
For additional information on how storytelling relates to accreditation processes, see Chapter 7 by Natasha Jankowski and David Marshall on "Reframing Academic Quality" from the book *Degrees that Matter: Moving Towards a Learning Systems Paradigm*.

Final Thoughts

The ability of an institution to clearly and convincingly communicate the learning outcomes and accomplishments of their graduates—regardless of program of study—is paramount to the success of our students, institutions, and larger national economic and competitive priorities. Policymakers and external stakeholders are increasingly questioning the value of higher education experiences, focusing on labor market outcomes and other metrics of success divorced from teaching and learning. Institutions and postsecondary education as a collective have struggled to respond to these claims, citing the complexity of evaluating student learning across varied and disparate programs in easily comparable ways. We have been reactive as opposed to proactive in our narratives of effectiveness and quality. We can no longer afford to simply report, we need to communicate and communicate effectively to varied audiences.
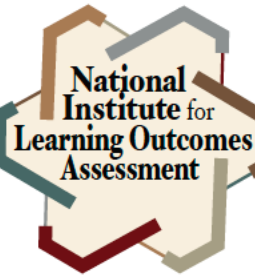
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