National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
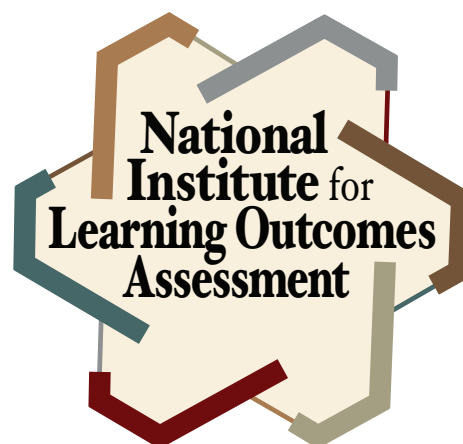
Building a Narrative via Evidence-Based Storytelling

A Toolkit for Practice

Natasha Jankowski & Gianina Baker

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

Contents

NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.
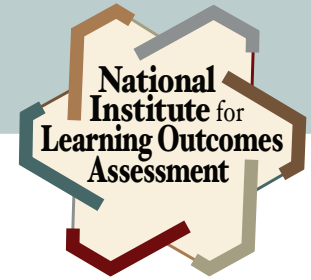
National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Please Cite As:

Building a Narrative via Evidence-Based Storytelling

Natasha Jankowski & Gianina Baker

This toolkit is designed to help you think through various elements in the creation of a compelling, evidence-based story. It was developed through document and narrative analysis review of accreditation reports, program reviews, and annual assessment reports. In addition to the individual questions to consider when crafting a narrative, the toolkit includes resources for undertaking a group activity to peer review reports, documents, or data visualizations. This peer review process has been field-tested over the last three years and refined with different groups including assessment professionals, faculty, and institutional research staff.

The toolkit includes the following elements:

Evidence-Based Storytelling Development: This includes questions to consider in the development and/or refinement of an evidence-based story. It may be used by an individual or a group. It is most useful when coupled with the Evidence-Based Storytelling occasional paper (Jankowski, 2019). Should you not have time to review the entire occasional paper, you may use the Evidence-Based Storytelling Handout in this toolkit to start the conversation.

Tips for Report Writers: This resource presents a short list of tips to consider in report presentation. The tips were curated from the Excellence in Assessment designee narrative reports, the testing and refinement of the toolkit, the narrative development literature more broadly, and the data collection and review of assessment-related reports.

Evidence-Based Storytelling Handout: Should you be interested in undertaking an assessment office, committee, or larger professional development exercise around narrative development, the handout provides a brief overview of narrative considerations, resources, and different conceptualizations of narrative concepts for group discussion and framing. Coupled with the Occasional Paper, *Evidence-Based Storytelling* (Jankowski, 2019) this provides an easy take-away for people to continue the conversation.

Narrative Peer Review Process: This one-pager may be shared with a group brought together to peer review a narrative or report. It provides timing and approach to collective feedback processes, based on the carousel timing of the NILOA assignment charrette. The institutional examples as supplemental materials to the toolkit are examples of this process in action.

Feedback Sheet: Provides a sample of a feedback sheet that may be used in the group review process to provide targeted and relevant feedback to the person sharing their report or narrative. The questions are based upon the Evidence-Based Storytelling Development questions in the opening of the toolkit.

Evidence-Based Storytelling Development

This sheet is designed to walk you through the various points of consideration in development of an evidence-based story to a target audience. You can work through these questions individually or as a group.

1. Audience: Who is the target audience of the narrative (such as administration, policy maker, students, staff, etc.)? Is it internal or external? Are there other audiences who may be interested?

Primary Audience:

Secondary Audience(s):

NOTE: Be sure to segment the audience—if you list administration, which particular administrators such as senior leadership, board members, mid-level, deans, department chairs, etc.? Be as specific as possible in segmenting the audience to help target your narrative. Also, while there may be several audiences who may read the report or that you would like to make aware of the report, the primary audience is the audience who can act on the information, use it to make a decision, or actually do something about it.

2. Argument: What argument do you want to make to your target audience? What are the goals for the story? What do you want the audience(s) to take away from this story?

3. Evidence: What evidence do you have to assert your claims (i.e., data sources, indirect/direct evidence of learning, etc.)? For the primary audience, what counts as compelling, actionable evidence? Do you have that evidence? And is it the evidence that you think they should be aware of? *Remember on audiences, our evidence needs may not align, and they may not be interested in methodology, but need information in order to trust the data source as part of a larger argument being made—depending on focus, different amounts and types of information/evidence are needed. Don't assume, ask the audience.

Primary audience:
a. Evidence:

Secondary audience(s):
a. Evidence:

4. Story and Language: What kind of story are you telling? (i.e., compliance, improvement, loss, struggle, quest, tragedy, fantasy, etc.)? Is your audience interested in that type of story? What context is needed for readers to understand the story? What is the setting?

NOTE: The language you choose is important with the type of story you are telling. What is the tone of your story? Is the language appropriate for your target audience(s)? How familiar is your audience with the back story or acronyms?

5. Characters: Who are the character(s) in your story? (Is there a protagonist in your story—someone who is driving the action and/or someone with whom your audience is likely to identify? What are the motivations of the characters?)

NOTE: Characterization is the information that the author gives the reader about the characters themselves. What context do readers need to understand your characters? Are there any preconceived notions about the characters that need to be addressed early in the narrative? Any assumptions or myths that can be dispelled or addressed with data?

6. Plot: What is the plot? (The plot is the causal sequence of events and includes setting and conflict.) Plot elements include:

1. Exposition is the information needed to understand a story.
2. Complication is the catalyst that begins the major conflict.
3. Climax is the turning point in the story that occurs when characters try to resolve the complication.
4. Resolution is the set of events that bring the story to a close. However, not all stories have a resolution—it could be a cliff hanger.

a. Setting: What is the context? Any important circumstances or conditions to include?
b. Conflict: What are we trying to address or overcome? (internal/external barriers)
c. What is the theory of change or argument you need to make to provide support from the evidence gathered and presented, to the claims being made?
d. Potential uses of the data: How might readers use the information provided moving forward?

7. Data Visualizations: If you are using visuals in your narrative, are they appropriate? Do they support the story you are trying to share or detract from it? Did you make meaning of them for the reader, or are you presenting the visuals and expecting your reader or listener to make sense of them (and is there enough presented visually to enable this approach)?

8. Awareness and Discoverability: Based on the story you crafted, what is the best medium through which to share it? Video, written narrative, shorter visual image pieces, a combination, others? Which means are the best to reach your target audience? How will you make them aware of it and how will they find it? What usability testing to determine communication fit with your target audiences will you employ?

Additional Reflective Questions on the Organizational Narrative:

1. What story is the institution trying to tell internally and externally? Is the story clear to a variety of audiences?
2. Are there conflicting stories being presented from different sources or venues?
3. Who is the institution telling the story to OR which audience(s) are you trying to persuade?
4. What is the argument being made to each audience?
5. Who is involved in locating evidence, selecting evidence, and engaging with evidence to make meaning for the institution and the story? How trustworthy is the evidence?
6. What organizational structures and processes support the review of evidence for inclusion in the institutional story?
7. How does the institutional culture, mission, and goals inform the story presented?
8. What evidence and elements are most important to tell the story? Where are there gaps and what additional evidence is required to tell a different story?

Tips for Report Writers

Ensure that you lead the report with what is most relevant to the audience—not what you find most interesting or want to say. Move additional information into an appendix for those that may want to know more about how data were collected and analyzed. The report should be about the findings, not the collection and analysis process. Also, just because you have data on something doesn't mean it needs to end up in the report. Ask before including: is it something you can do anything about? Can we impact this number? Or is this contextual information that needs to be included regardless?

Ensure that there is enough context provided around the information for the reader to make sense of it if you aren't there to explain it. Remember to answer the "so what" question for readers. Also, move beyond summary and/or description to analysis and synthesis for reader.

Give the report to someone not familiar with it—if they are overwhelmed by the amount of data tables or visualization choices, then your audience will be too. While it can be very fun to make visuals, if the figure/graph/data visual does not contribute or add to the narrative, then take it out.

Consider developing audience specific report templates such that your usual audiences know where to look to find relevant information.

Be consistent in graphs and how visualize data. In all instances, don't make your reader work harder to intake the data. Present "less" and "more" findings together, don't jump back and forth between them. To a reader it is like changing the range on a survey scale from 1 – 5 with 5 being strongly agree to 1 – 5 with 1 being strongly agree.

Consider preparing reports, not by instrument used to collect the information, but by findings or learning outcomes, pulling data from across multiple sources to make a point. While questions might be in a particular order on a survey, we don't have to stick to that for findings. Instead, we can group things together around shared points that make sense for the reader and enhance the argument. Further, target the report to institutional priorities: mission, strategic plan, state mandates, initiatives, and the like.

Just because it is posted on a website or an email went out about the report being available doesn't mean anyone is aware of it or how/when it may be useful to them in their decision-making process.

An entire report of bulleted items takes away the effectiveness of using bullets.

Giving people a list of activities does not mean they will understand what was done, why, and what that means to them.

Provide reports that begin the meaning making process for readers—synthesize information and present findings. In addition, connect the data to real people. Making the information lived and tied to a story or persona allows readers to connect with the information, leading to more likely use of the data to inform practice.

Use **bold**, color, image, to draw attention, and headers. Just don't use them all at once.

The report should be a stand-alone document. People share things with others, so write it for the third person who hasn't been a part of the conversation to get the email forward and have enough information to understand what they are looking at and why. Also, include contact information where people can follow up.

Evidence-Based Storytelling Handout

In an era of accountability, reporting, and questions on the value and worth of higher education, 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 in a coherent argument. Several efforts are underway to support institutions in this process including the Excellence in Assessment Designation, NILOA's Transparency Framework (2011), analysis of organizational digital narratives, and the use of evidence-based storytelling (Jankowski, 2019).

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 assessment practice without articulating **why that practice is important within that context**. https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eia/

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. https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework/

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? Evidence-based storytelling is based on Toulmin's (2003) model of argumentation where evidence is utilized in support of a claim made about institutional accountability and effectiveness or improvement. The evidence and claims are supported by a warrant which explains "the why"—why the author thinks the evidence supports the claim in question.

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 via a variety of media. The themes of the narratives can be intentional, or emerge from several messages across several webpages. Personal narratives focus on 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. 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 of its 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.
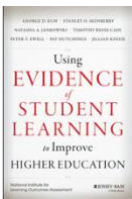
For additional information, resources, and approaches related to reporting as communication and narrative, see Chapter 10 by Natasha Jankowski and Timothy Reese Cain on moving "From Compliance Reporting to Effective Communication: Assessment and Transparency" in the book *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*.
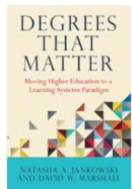
For additional information on how storytelling relates to accreditation processes, see Chapter 7 by Natasha Jankowski and David Marshall on "Reframing Academic Quality" from the book *Degrees that Matter: Moving Towards a Learning Systems Paradigm*.

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.

References and Additional Resources

Abrahamson, C. E. (1998). Storytelling as a pedagogical tool in higher education. *Education, 118*(3), 440-451.

Butcher, S. E. (2006). Narrative as a teaching strategy. *Journal of Correctional Education, 57*(3), 195-208.

Evergreen, S. D. (2014). *Presenting data effectively: Communicating your findings for maximum impact*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Evergreen, S. D. (2017). *Effective data visualization: The right chart for the right data.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Evergreen, S. D. (2020). *The data visualization sketch book.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Feldman, S. (1990). Stories as cultural creativity: On the relation between symbolism and politics in organizational change. *Human Relations, 43*(9), 809-828.

Jankowski, N. A. (2019, October). *Evidence-based storytelling.* (Occasional Paper No. 41). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Jankowski, N. A., & Baker, G. R. (2019, October). *Building a narrative via evidence-based storytelling: A toolkit for practice*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Jankowski, N. A., & Marshall, D. W. (2017). *Degrees that matter: Moving higher education to a learning systems paradigm.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Kuh, G. D. (2007). Risky business: The promises and pitfalls of institutional transparency. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 39*(5), 30-35.

Kuh, G.D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N.A., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, K. (2015). *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. (2011). *Transparency Framework*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, Author. Retrieved from: https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework/

Shulman, L. S. (2007). Counting and recounting: Assessment and the quest for accountability. *Change, 39*(1), 10-25.

Toulmin, S. E. (2003). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge university press.

Whyte, G., & Ralake, M. (2013). *An investigation into the effectiveness of storytelling as means of sharing tacit knowledge.* In Proceedings of the European Conference on Information Management & Evaluation (pp. 309-317).

Narrative Peer Review Process

In groups of 4-5, each person will have an opportunity to share their report and receive suggestions and feedback from the group. In order for everyone to have an opportunity to give and receive feedback, we will use a timed carousel process. There will be two rounds with a break after the first to get feedback on the process. If you shared a report in advance, you will be a "presenter" for one round and a "participant" for the other round. All other members at the table will be participants for both rounds. If desired, groups can assign specific audience roles to participants when providing feedback.

Each round is 40 minutes.

Introduce report (15 min):
Presenters will introduce the report and provide background information such as: the purpose of the report, the target audience, any secondary audiences, potential or desired uses of the report, what they find most challenging about the report or prior experiences with similar reports, how they hope to strengthen it, and what kinds of feedback and suggestions they would like from others. Please also take time to read the report after listening to the presenter.
Listeners: jot down thoughts and questions but please do not interrupt the presenter, let them have their full time. You may ask clarifying questions.

Review (20 min):
Participants will respond to what they have heard, taking turns asking questions, sharing thoughts, feedback, etc. The purpose of the review is to help your colleague strengthen the argument, presentation, and narrative of the report—so please be constructive and collegial. Also, mind the time and allow each participant the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Discussion should address the questions on the narrative feedback sheet—pay particular attention to audience, evidence, and argument.
Presenters: listen carefully and respond to the inquiries. Think about what is feasible and related to crafting a meaningful narrative for target audiences, but also think creatively about possible solutions to challenges identified.

Feedback (5 min):
Everyone: Based on the discussion, use the narrative feedback form to give the presenter written feedback and suggestions. The presenter can use this time to write down notes about the report based on what they just heard, along with outlining next steps for revision or additional feedback.

Note: This process can be tailored to consider data visualization, report layout, the argument presented and how it is supported by evidence, as well as the narrative piece among other angles. The point is to pick a focus of the review as the allotted time will not allow for addressing the entirety of the narrative.

Feedback Sheet

Storyteller: _____

Reviewer: _____

Framing: What purpose does this narrative serve? Basically, what is the point of telling it, what is trying to be accomplished? What argument is trying to be made?

Audience: To whom is the narrative targeted? Does the presentation, evidence, argument align with the target audience? What suggestions would you offer the storyteller in meaningfully communicating to the target audience?

Argument: What suggestions do you have for the argument in relation to the supporting evidence? Is it well supported? Does the evidence align with the audience? Is it compelling? What else is needed to make the case?

Medium: What is the best medium by which to share the narrative? Is it a report? Presentation? Media? How will the audience find it (in essence, how will the narrative be discoverable)?

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
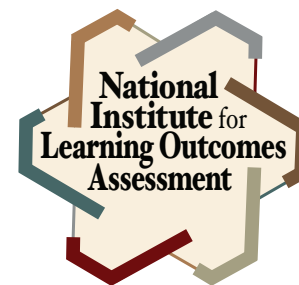
NILOA Staff

Natasha Jankowski, *Director*

Gianina Baker, *Assistant Director*

Katie Schultz, *Project Manager*

Erick Montenegro, *Communications Coordinator and Research Analyst*

Verna F. Orr*, Post-Doctoral Researcher*

NILOA Senior Scholars

Peter Ewell, *Senior Scholar*

Pat Hutchings*, Senior Scholar*

Jillian Kinzie, *Senior Scholar*

George Kuh, *Founding Director and Senior Scholar*

Paul Lingenfelter, *Senior Scholar*

David Marshall*, Senior Scholar*

Nan Travers*, Senior Scholar*

NILOA Sponsors

Lumina Foundation for Education

University of Illinois, College of Education

Follow us on social media:

@NILOA_web

@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly NILOA Newsletter and stay up to date with our research and publications.

For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive
Suite 196, CRC, MC-672
Champaign, IL 61820

learningoutcomesassessment.org
niloa@education.illinois.edu
Phone: 217.244.2155