Use of Narratives to Communicate Value in Educational Development

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In the postsecondary educational context, the value of educational development can be challenging to convey. Currently used and widely touted performance metrics often prove inadequate for the scope and wisdom of this type of work and fail to reflect its value. Despite these limitations, there are rich, interdependent, and compelling experiences and informative lessons that do convey value and satisfy the drive to quantify impact. In this article, we draw on existing models and approaches to make meaning from evaluation and put forward a framework for eliciting narratives of experience to communicate value. Through this process, educational developers and leaders working in centres for teaching and learning can reflect on their activities, identify lessons, incorporate affective experiences, readjust goals, and celebrate achievements. They can do this in ways that evidence and communicate to academic stakeholders the value of their contributions and collective efforts.

Introduction

Though recent studies have identified that educational developers are already an over-stretched and burnt-out academic group, current shifts have resulted in an expansion in the nature and scope of educational development work without any additional resources to staff or support these efforts (Kolomitro, Kenny, & Sheffield, 2020, 2021). Shifts include changing trends to delivery models, societal needs and expectations, institutional priorities, and external demands for accountability (Kolomitro et al., 2021). As a result, many Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) staff seek to reflect on practices and to assess and convey the value of activities in ways that identify priorities and communicate efforts more meaningfully to institutional stake-

holders for funding and resource purposes. Further, as post-secondary institutions are impacted by ongoing crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and subjected to increasing scrutiny by external stakeholders and funding agencies, educational developers may find themselves at an opportune time to reflect on and document their work, as well as articulate this information outward in an accessible and compelling manner (Sharif et al., 2019).

A real challenge emerges, however: How do educational developers decide what types of information are useful and meaningful, and for whom? Shifting data ecologies marked by the growing speed, quantity, complexity, and accuracy of information in academic environments (Ellaway, 2021), coupled with varying institutional and global priorities, make it difficult and overwhelming to collect and use information in a systemic and thoughtful way. Yet, Ellis et al. (2020) suggest that "there is a real danger [that,]…if we do not identify appropriate assessment frameworks and practices, others will do it for us without necessarily understanding what is meaningful in our context" (p. 337).

In this paper, as educational developers and leaders of CTLs, we offer an approach that our peers can use to mobilize narratives to evidence the value of their work. After discussing the use of narratives for centres, we provide a framework for using narrative to evidence value and explore a scenario in which a member of the author group employed this approach. Through the example, we draw attention to elements of the framework that were applied.

The Uses of Narratives to Evidence Value

Educational developers have traditionally drawn on quantitative data (i.e., attendance records, satisfaction scales, and retention numbers) to communicate value. However, these data have limitations for conveying the value of emerging and transforming practice and for conveying the complexity of human experiences, the varying and sometimes conflicting cultures and micro-cultures within and across teaching and learning environments, and the contextual factors that influence practice and raise institutional reputation.

In certain spheres of evaluation within higher education—for example, regarding teaching effectiveness—we are seeing an increasingly robust, multi-faceted approach to evaluation with many scholars reasoning that quantitative data, though easy to count and communicate, are not adequately reflective of educational practice (Arreola, 2007; Buller, 2012; Ghedin & Aquario, 2008; Zakrajsek, 2006).

In a survey on evaluation practices in CTLs, Kolomitro and Anstey (2017) recommend that "centres look to evaluation frameworks that aid in the consideration of intended outcomes to inform questions, that alternate ways of knowing through narratives and practice wisdom be incorporated into evaluation practices, and that centres continue to consider their intended audiences" (p. 11). Likewise, Bamber and Stefani (2016) call on educational developers to focus less on capturing impact and more on evidencing value, a change that "involves gathering a mix of types of evidence, questioning it, making sense of the evidence on the basis of context-specific judgement, and then harnessing the findings to inform future thinking" (p. 245). They assert that harnessing one's "opinion, judgement, and uncertainty" can help capture and more adequately contextualize "real world phenomena" (p. 245). Expanding beyond the purposes of developing/testing theory, qualitative approaches to evaluation and research can, according to Patton (2015), create truths through approaches that evoke emotion, offer aesthetic quality, feel authentic, and embed lived experiences and distinct voices. Such evocative criteria attend to interrelationships and capture emergence or systems thinking.
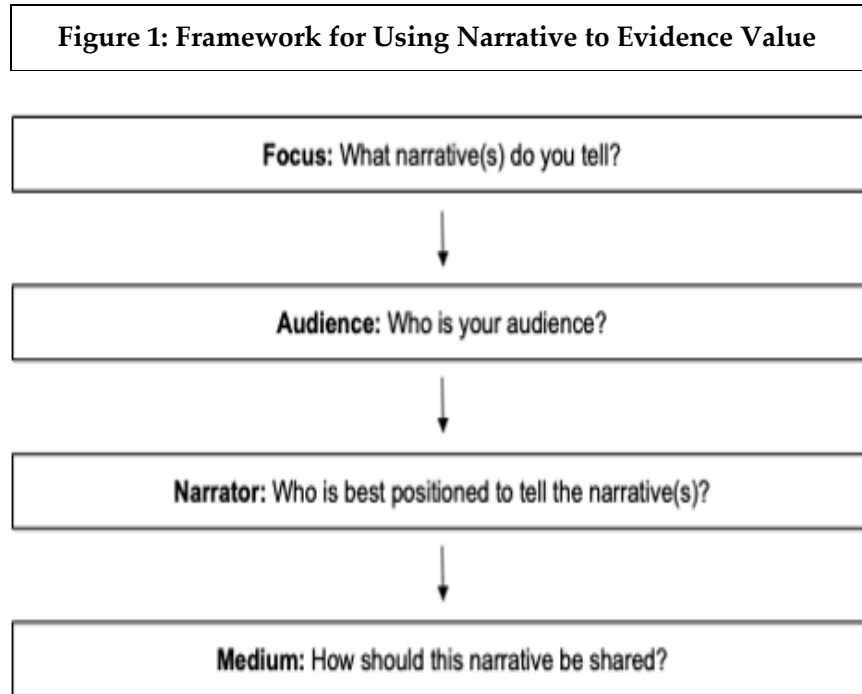
The collection and analysis of rich, context-driven narratives, capturing multiple voices and experiences, can offer a complementary approach to the way educational developers understand, evidence, and communicate their value and the nature of their work to diverse audiences. As McClintock (2004) notes, narrative methods: 1) lend themselves to participatory change processes; 2) focus on particular interventions while also reflecting circumstances—the environment, the constraints and challenges that influence outcomes; 3) can be systematically gathered and analyzed using existing frameworks; 4) can be integrated into organizational processes to inform planning and decision making; and 5) can be shaped to target different audiences.

Narratives are pragmatically useful and can be epistemically disruptive as they move beyond exploring value through quantifiable means as a single inherent truth to telling the story of one of multiple lived truths. Narratives provide a structure and format to communicate, while also raising considerations of how we know the value of educational development work, how we convey that value, and what it means to know the work is valuable.

A Framework for Using Narrative to Evidence Value

This article reflects the diverse perspectives of collaborators experienced in multiple traditions, disciplines, roles, and institutions. We engage in narrative approaches to reflect on the work of CTLs and to evidence their value. In developing this framework, we shared our own narratives, synthesized our experiences, and consulted epistemic and disciplinary lenses that draw on praxis wisdom, reflection models, and existing approaches to evaluation (Bamber & Stefani, 2016; Schön, 1983; Sharif et al., 2019). We ground our approach to evidencing value in the traditions and transformative potential of narrative and storytelling (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; McClintock, 2004; Sole & Wilson, 2002; Van Manen, 1994; Williams, Labonte, & O'Brien, 2003). In couching our approach within these traditions, we are particularly drawing on the power of narrative and storytelling to capture both personal experiences as well as identify interpersonal connections and practices, which can play an important role in (re)constructing and communicating communal narratives (Williams et al., 2003). As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, "narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways" (p. 10). Even more intriguing, Sole and Wilson (2002) write that stories can be used within and across organizations as a powerful way to exchange knowledge, share goals, and generate connection.

In an effort, then, to capture experience, our framework is organized into four components: focus, audience, narrator, and medium (Figure 1). The first step to using narrative is to identify a focus, which can be done by considering CTL priorities and reflecting on educational developers' experiences. Second, it is important to step back and reflect on a centre's context and identify its audience, as reflection will impact how a narrative is put together and disseminated (McClintock, 2004). Third, it is useful to revisit a centre's goals and consider who is best positioned to author a narrative. Finally, it is necessary to determine through which medium a narrative should be shared/disseminated. Reflective questions that help elicit experiences in each of the four components are shared in Table 1 of the Appendix.

Figure 1: Framework for Using Narrative to Evidence Value

Focus: What narrative(s) do you tell?

Audience: Who is your audience?

Narrator: Who is best positioned to tell the narrative(s)?

Medium: How should this narrative be shared?

To help illustrate the framework, we include the following real-life example of how narrative can be used, provided by a member of the author group reflecting on the coordination of a student research initiative in a large Canadian research-intensive university. Her narrative sought to explore and share how students were being impacted by a research-based teaching initiative focused on implementing undergraduate research in year one across an institution of higher learning in Canada. She described her experience and motivations for collecting and communicating narrative to evidence value. We review this example through the lens of the framework. Readers can review the real-world example, refer to the framework, and consider the commensurability and value of this approach to generating and mobilizing narrative in light of their particular context and objectives.

Focus: What Narrative(s) Can You Tell?

The coordinator began by exploring and selecting what narrative would be most valuable to highlight in a context of competing institutional priorities:

As part of the initiative, I worked with student assistants to develop student stories, profiling individual students who had been interviewed by the assistant, and then that turned into an article with an accompanying photograph to feature on our website. We paired [student stories], after the first year, with faculty profiles. So, we profiled faculty who were champions of undergraduate research as a teaching approach, or who were supervising summer undergraduate research assistantships, and then we we used social media to extend the reach and disseminate the stories.

By selecting profiles of student narratives from diverse perspectives as a focus, the coordinator raised awareness of student opportunities and built capacity for the participating students to see themselves succeed. For institutional stakeholders, profiles conveyed contribution to strategic priorities and created a case for continued support for the program. The collection of stories evolved to become a series of narratives that, when accumulated, worked together to illustrate the value of the program.

The rationale for communicating the identified narrative data was multifaceted. The specific goals for the project from which narratives were collected are described as follows:

The goals of the initiative were to offer every undergraduate a research experience. Specifically focusing on implementing a First-Year Research Experience (FYRE) into existing first-year classes. Secondary aims were to align instructors' research and teaching mandates, accelerate or reinvigorate faculty research including SoTL, and to differentiate the institution by leveraging research opportunity, expertise, and infrastructure.

Here, the coordinator focused on student profiles as the narrative that aligned with the objectives of the initiative itself: to increase research experience offerings for undergraduate students and build faculty capacity for research, for teaching about research, and for pedagogical innovation.

Audience: Who Is Your Audience?

The coordinator identified several audiences: students, faculty, committees adjudicating awards, the research communications office, and upper administration. Though these audiences were often familiar with quantitative metrics more than qualitative, the profiles featured on websites, social media, and annual reports clearly had value beyond the narrow scope of only quantitative reporting.

In this case, the profiles were described as "wildly popular," even more so than some of the narratives the professional research communications office was disseminating, possibly because they integrated student voices. This set of student profiles is described below as "contributing to a movement," which emphasizes not only reach, but relevance, and an aesthetic or affective quality, as narrative can connect with audiences in ways that other kinds of data cannot:

> *They [the student and faculty profiles] were wildly popular. The research communications office came and asked me what I was doing because some of the student-produced stories were receiving substantially more readership than the professional stories put out by the research office….So, this story-telling was really expanding and contributing to a movement and a momentum and creating a lot of positive energy.*

In addition to disseminating student profiles through social media and annual reporting, the coordinator used additional strategies to reach audiences at in-person events.

> *… At times, when hosting events, I was asked to contribute speaking notes or to write speeches for upper-level administrators, all of which proved great opportunities to provide the kinds of storytelling, and the kind of narratives, useful to illustrate the impact the initiative was having.*

By using narrative, the coordinator also reached extended stakeholders, including the provincial government, which resulted in unexpected yet positive effects:

> *This kind of momentum allowed me to be put in touch with a senior research analyst who was facilitating development of a research scorecard for each institutional faculty, college, or school. The scorecards began to depict the number of student enrollments in FYRE and the number of courses aligned with the initiative. The director of [assessment and analytics], the heart of the university responsible for institutional planning and assessment for the institution, … worked with me … on algorithms to enhance and enrich the kind of tracking and statistics to support storytelling that could come on an institutional basis when things reached that kind of capacity….*
> *[Other] spin offs worth mentioning were the Ministry of Advanced Education in the province of Saskatchewan in which I was working would pick-up the stories that*

featured the stories of … international students and feature them so the reach … expanded. These narratives, first-person and second-person stories, were a really important and powerful way to build a culture, to reveal a positive initiative, an approach that had benefits for many participants and stakeholders: faculty, staff, and students, leaders and government. And that went on to inform planning and decision-making and to reflect back what mattered and what meaning could be made of the initiative itself.

In this case, a multifaceted and complex narrative collection and dissemination process served multiple purposes and reached varied audiences. This approach helped the coordinator communicate and solidify the perceived and actual value of the student research program, such as highlighting student success and validating support and investments by stakeholders.

Narrator: Who Is Best Positioned to Tell the Narration(s)?

Part of mobilizing narrative is deciding whose telling of the narrative will best achieve the intended goals. The coordinator found it especially fitting that profiles were composed by students, as they were primarily focused on their first-hand experience as researchers. The coordinator facilitated these first-person narratives by providing prompts and the forum. The response to the student-created profiles was sufficiently positive that their success inspired the Research Communications Office, which then opted to include narratives into administrator speeches:

The success of the student profiles led to being called into the research communications office and into conversations with the senior research analyst in the Vice President's office and with the director of institutional assessment and analytics. This [interest] was due to some of the student narratives gaining more readership than the average, professionally produced research articles. From there, narratives were also integrated into the addresses given by university dignitaries, including the president's and vice-provosts' speeches.

Sole and Wilson (2002) write that narratives used within organizations and provided in the first-person can be a powerful mechanism to share knowledge, build trust, and create collective vision. Further, imparting narratives to inform planning and decision-making across existing organizational processes affirms their usefulness (McClintock, 2004).

Medium: How Should This Narrative Be Shared?

Once the coordinator determined the focus, the audience, and who is best suited to telling the narrative, it was important for her to consider how the narratives should be shared. Considerations included types of evidence that the institutional context values, modalities that were effective, and prior institutional activities:

One of the qualitative approaches involved featuring student-stories and faculty-stories in written articles produced by student assistants or produced first-hand by student researchers and edited by the student-staff and coordinator. These were rapidly developed and showcased on the institutional webpage and across social media (Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook). Annual reports were also produced….

There were several record-keeping processes and evaluation mechanisms instilled from the beginning according to a Logic Model (Sangster, et al., 2016). *Quantitative data was collected and analyzed across all the participating classes and other related activities such as summer research assistantships and faculty involvement….*

As testament to the relevance and impact of the coordinator's decisions around context and modalities, other units in the institution adapted this approach of integrating narratives into quantitative reporting.

As well, elements were integrated into faculty and school-based scorecards that internally tracked and reported on student enrolment and faculty involvement in the initiative. At its peak in 2019-2020, 75% of student enrolments across introductory courses involved a First-Year Research Experience (FYRE).

Note that in the above example, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from and shared through a variety of sources, including social media. Furthermore, the data informed the narratives, which iteratively informed subsequent data collection, in turn affecting internal institutional records and broader ranking and government communications.

Conclusion

Challenges inherent to the use of narratives to evidence educational development do arise, some of which are illustrated in the case example, but

these can be mitigated through in-depth reflective consideration of context, power-dynamics, social capital, timing, or feasibility; many of these contextual elements are outlined in Table 2 in the Appendix. While a fulsome examination of these are beyond the scope of this article, practitioners can attend to contextual specifics using the prompts in the tables provided in the Appendix. The example informs the framework and usability by way of the tables (in the Appendix) such that equivalent data collection processes and evaluation practices could be reconstituted as narrative for communicating value.

Moreover, the illustrative example conveys the pragmatic yet diverse value that narrative can achieve. As an approach, narratives can effectively account for the multifaceted and relational activities and wisdom with which educational developers engage. Narratives may also contribute to innovating evaluation practices and signaling transformation in spite of the challenges and pressures facing the practice of developers and centres. Ultimately, the featured example provides for how narrative can be used successfully in spite of infinite considerations and variables beyond the scope of work.

At its heart, the framework outlined in this paper highlights a means to evidence the value of educational development practice at a time when the field is expanding in nature and scope. As educational development becomes increasingly difficult to articulate with numerical reports and reductionist metrics, integrating or re-affirming narratives as evidence can complement and bolster data sources and situate context-driven, captivating, and human dimensions. The description of the four components invites intentional consideration, reflection, and planning for the focus, audience, narrator and medium when conveying the activities and value associated with the work of educational development. Narrative can be a tool for reflecting on the work and evidencing value within existing paradigms as a way to complement existing accounts, or as a tool to move beyond the dominant quantitative methods of evaluation. In using narrative, educational developers and CTL leaders can avoid limited, sterile, and mechanized quantitative accounts of evaluation. Rather, narratives position the rich and humanizing landscape of the nature of the work, asserting "what we can come to revalue in our universities in attending to the lived and felt" (Al-Mahmood et al., 2020, p.82).

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Appendix

Devloping Your Own Narratives: Using the Framework

In order to develop your own narratives, the reflection questions in Table 1 provide guiding prompts when eliciting and preparing to convey a narrative about your educational development work or Centre of Teaching and Learning (CTL).

Table 1. Guided Reflection Questions for Developing Your Narrative
Focus: What narrative(s) can you tell?
Reflection/Prompting Questions What are your values as an educational developer? • What are your Centre's values? • What activities have you engaged in (e.g., workshops; program development; communities of practice; SoTL projects, resource development, etc.)? • What successes have you had? Or challenges? Or lessons learned? • What outcomes or experiences are worth telling? • In your context, what stories are currently being shared, and heard? • In your context, what stories might contribute to enhanced perception, reputation, or diversification?
Audience: Who is your audience?
Reflection/Prompting Questions • As an educational developer, what is important for you to say, or share, at this moment? • Who is your intended audience? • Who is included in your current audience? • Who is beyond your current audience that you can seek to include?

- Is the audience ready to hear your narrative?

- How well do your goals align with our audience's goals?

- What does this audience value?

- Does your focus align with these values, or does it challenge them?

Narrator: Who is best positioned to tell the narrative(s)

Reflection/Prompting Questions

- Who is best suited to relay your outcomes or experiences as narratives?

- Who is trusted and seen as credible to tell the narrative?

- Who can best animate or embody the narrative?

- Whose voices and perspectives can best portray the narrative to the selected audience?

Medium: How should this narrative be shared?

Reflection/Prompting Questions

- What forms of evidence are well received in your context (e.g., reports, social media posts, journalistic articles, refereed articles or presentations, posters, strategic plans, etc.)?

- What forms of communication are effective and relevant?

- What modality or presentation is authentic, evocative, and aesthetic?

- What timeline could be effective? What seasons, activities, events, or promotions might aptly coincide with your sharing this narrative?

- What has your audience recently heard (from you or others)?

- What is the broader context in which your narrative is situated?

Using Narratives in Your Own Context

As active participants working in post-secondary institutions fraught with specific histories, priorities, and cultures, educational developers are building on or navigating existing, and at times competing, narratives. As such, there are a number of factors to consider, particularly relating to context, timing, and positionality outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Considerations for Using Narratives	
Focus	• In what ways might dominant paradigms in your context be tended to or complemented (i.e. audit culture)? • What ought to be communicated about value for individuals or units in your context?
Audience	• In what ways might you incorporate or diversify institutional ideas of what constitutes quality or what is valued? • What are priorities and concerns within the shifting terrain in your context at the local, institutional, government, and leadership levels?
Narrator	• How might you accommodate or amplify stated institutional goals and strategies? • What voices and experiences have been previously overlooked or missed? • Who has sufficient status, cache or social capital (i.e. faculty status, or Centre/Institute leadership status, student leadership status) to convey the narrative?
Medium	• What forms and modalities are currently relevant? • How can you encourage your audiences to embrace new media? • What media can amplify the narrative?