Sustainability Opportunities: Storytelling Technical Assistance Brief

Linking Systems of Care (LSC) is a demonstration project designed to support and document the work of statewide initiatives as they promote healing for young victims of crime. The project develops and coordinates trauma-informed intervention services for children, youth, and their families. LSC is demonstrating change in four states that were chosen for the strength of their application in a competitive federal award process. They are all remarkable in the strength of their statewide collaborations, diversity of their youth populations and stakeholders, and long-term commitment to modelling change.

Data of all types are increasingly used to spontaneously share stories about the impact of system reform. Social media and the ability to post data in the form of quick links to resources or pictures and video clips are among the more common examples. Advances in technology are also helping to accelerate progress and enable storytelling with interactive data visualizations, podcasts, and video clips embedded within websites.

The Linking Systems of Care (LSC) demonstration project sites are engaged in a variety of data collection activities, including listening sessions, formal and informal focus groups, and group interviews. The sites have also generated data in the form of products they have created, including formal gap analysis reports and victim screener instrument validation studies. Some of these data have been analyzed in a formal manner, with varying levels of sophistication. As their formal grant-supported phases draw to an end, opportunities exist for the LSC jurisdictions to use their data for telling a compelling story.

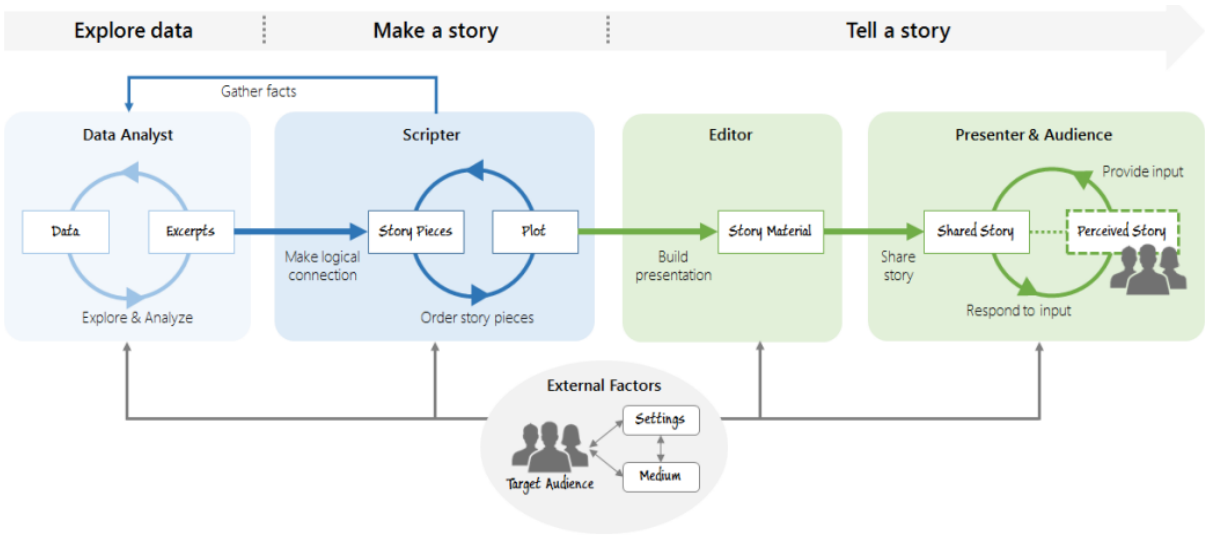

Figure 1. Transforming data pieces into a story[1].

In this brief, we take a closer look at ways of organizing data and three steps for telling a story with it.

Storytelling: In this brief, storytelling is a medium (a report, video series, podcast, etc.) through which an audience enters the LSC world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Good storytelling values personal, lived experiences within the project.

Qualitative data: All of the LSC sites are involved in gathering qualitative data that can inform stories of broad interest. Some of the data are analyzed to determine what people say. There is a body of research used to understand how to do this thematic analysis well and with varying levels of rigor. An important distinction exists between gathering what people say and inquiring more deeply into processes such as how things unfold over time, and how they are influenced by relationships, background, and community. The latter is called a narrative analysis. Depending on the LSC project and

Key Terms

Data storytelling is the process of translating data analyses into layperson's terms in order to influence a business decision or action.

Narrative analysis is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding.

Qualitative data is defined as the data that approximates and characterizes. Qualitative data can be observed and recorded and is non-numerical in nature.

Quantitative data is data expressing a certain quantity, amount, or range. Usually, there are measurement units associated with the data.

Thematic analysis uses a coding structure or predetermined framework to analyze qualitative data for themes.

how it is organized, these processes may work informally in tandem or be distinct research activities. However, being mindful of the distinction and that they can be specific research activities grounded in formal methods is useful when planning to use storytelling.

Quantitative data: All of the LSC sites are also involved in gathering quantitative data. This includes information that counts the activities occurring in the projects at each of its levels. At the management level, it can include the number of meetings, meeting participation, website activity, and publication downloads. At the implementation level, it can include the number of screenings conducted for young victims, screening results, and information about response and referral.

3 Steps to Data Storytelling

"the essential science skill that everyone needs."

Over the past 10 years, there is increasing attention for data storytelling. Writing for Forbes magazine, Brent Dykes, characterized it as "the essential science skill that everyone needs."[2] This brief borrows from the data storytelling literature to adopt a 3-step process [3] for the LSC environment, with the caveat that qualitative data is also essential for creating a story. A story told with numbers is important but only if it provides context and connection to the qualitative data sources gathered during the project.

- What is the heart of your story?
- How does it stand out?
- If supported with research, how strongly are the findings being communicated?
- Who is the primary audience?
- What are the possible boundaries to reaching them?
- Who can be dissemination partners for your story?
- What channels will carry your story (e.g., broadcast media, personal contact, or a combination)?
- How will you know if your story is reaching your intended audience?

Step 1. Exploring and Organizing Data

Once the storytelling process has been defined, roles need to be assigned. Depending on the current LSC team staffing, one person could assume more than one role. This model assumes that a prior process has gathered and organized both narrative or qualitative data and quantitative data. In a storytelling process, the data analyst will explore the data in an effort to draw insights and provide the ingredients necessary to convert them later in the process. At this point in the process, the data may not be tied to a specific manner for viewing it (e.g., chart, table, infographic). The result of data

exploration is the selection of data excerpts helpful in informing the narrative analysis and for providing supporting data visuals, such as charts, tables, and infographics.

Step 2. Finding Your Story

This step relies upon Step 1 and a narrative analysis of qualitative data to organize excerpts into a storyline that is compelling. This stage is like the outlining stage in writing. A team member with the role of a story scripter is paying attention to sequence and building a framework or outline to flesh out. Activities include ordering, establishing logical connections, developing flow, formulating messages, and creating a resolution or final explanation for readers to take away and share with others.

Step 3. Telling Your Story Well

This step involves writing the story from the outline developed and supporting it with data. The storytelling can involve visual representations using data excerpts or narration. Upon creating the story, some planning is warranted for delivery and deciding what medium is best for sharing it. This is when decisions about the target audience and setting come into play and when the process can become circular. For example, the plot developed in Step 2 may be revisited over and over to create stories in different mediums, such as print, websites, video, and social media content. It becomes a shared story when it is told to at least one audience in a setting. Making a story and building a story (writing it or making it appear with the help of data visualizations) are different and require different skills and tools. A danger exists in blending the two phases and building your story as you tell it. This is akin to building the proverbial airplane while you fly it and it can lead to wasted time, at minimum, or an ineffective story that does not communicate well to its intended audience.

Consider Defining Roles

The process of making a story that is informed with data involves defining a process and roles for making things happen within the process. In a simple form, the steps are to explore data, make a story, tell the story well and get the story to your target audiences, such as the public-at-large, policymakers, or practitioners. A scripter builds a plot from excerpts provided to them, the editor prepares the substance of the story, and the story presenter is responsible for delivering the story. In an LSC environment, one person is unlikely to take on all roles. For example, professional data analysts or statisticians may tell a technical story in a research report. But who has the role, and does the contract require them to also provide the data exploration role for developing a story? This is often not the case and may require a different type of researcher—one that is adept at organizing the most interesting excerpts during the data exploring phase. This person may also be able to take on the role of an editor but more likely a writer or journalist. They may have the skill to develop supporting data visualizations for the narrative or they may have to work with a desktop publisher to refine excerpts that are best supported with data visualizations. [4]

[1] Bongshin Lee (et. al) 2015. More Than Telling a Story: A Closer Look at the Process of Transforming Data into Visually Shared Stories. Online.

[2] Brent Dykes. 2016. Data Storytelling: The Essential Data Science Skill Everyone Needs. Forbes. March 31, 2016. Online.

[3] Robert Kosara and Jock Mackinlay. Storytelling: The Next Step for Visualization. Online.

[4] Erica Perry 2019. 2020 Video Marketing Statistics: What Brands Need to Know. Online.

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