

# Telling Stories About the Library: Using Qualitative and Quantitative Data to Depict the Library

Presentation at ARLIS/NA Conference, Denver, May 4, 2008

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Assessment is a process of listening and then using what you hear to make improvements. Assessment can lead to change in something concrete – like a service. Assessment can also lead to changes in perceptions.

It is the latter I would like to highlight today. Rather than focus on assessment techniques themselves, the emphasis for this presentation is on *Stories made possible* by such assessment techniques **[Slide 2]** as surveys, interviews, focus groups, classroom assessment techniques, observations, and reports on use. All contribute to a view of the library that is triangulated from multiple points, and that can then be reflected back to various audiences as “stories” and can serve to change perceptions – which I see as one of our primary challenges these days.

## Why Stories?

Stories are personal. Stories are dramatic. Stories are engaging. Stories sidestep the distrust many seem to feel about numbers and their meaning.

Stories have a greater potential impact than data alone. Stories in some ways serve a similar function as images. You might even say that stories are to numbers what text is to images!

Many sources are promoting the use of “stories” rather than dry reports to convey information about the library. Indeed stories convey not just information, they convey image. We should not be surprised then that marketing and advocacy efforts such as ACRL’s advocacy toolkit are foremost amongst those promoting the story approach. [If asked the toolkit is titled *Power of Persuasion: Advancing the Academic Library Agenda from the Front Lines.*]

The listserv of the American Evaluation Association had a posting 12/10/07 promoting the CDC’s workbook on success stories. In that email S. Lavinghouze said it very well: “short, crisp narratives that don’t bog down the audience in details can bring the program to life in a way that more formal evaluation tools can’t.” [If asked, title of CDC publication is *Impact and Value: Telling Your Program’s Story*, 2007.]

Having a message and reinforcing it with data and through stories is, I think, the key to successful advocacy.

## What Do Stories Look Like?

Stories can be one-liners or more extended scenarios. I have myself been working on the one-liner approach, along the lines of marketing's "elevator message." For those who haven't heard this phrase, the elevator message seeks to condense whatever it is you want to convey into something short enough and punchy enough it can be shared effectively in the time it takes to go from one floor to the next in an elevator.

## Where do stories come from?

I am going to touch on just a few sources: class feedback, statistics, surveys, and exhibits.

### Class comments as story material

I have gleaned many one-liners through end-of-class-session comment forms – which form, by the way, is officially known as a "Classroom Assessment Technique." The form I like best is the "What stood out to you?" form. **[Slide 3]** I use it to get a sense of whether the students identify the points that reflect my major learning outcomes.

Here's an example. The presentation for this year's 3<sup>rd</sup> year class in *Architecture, Place and Identity* had several desired learning outcomes, including research process and tips, databases and other interdisciplinary sources, and using keyword to develop and refine a topic.

Here is some of the data I gathered about and through the forms. **[Slide 4]**

So even though it is collected as comments – qualitative – it can be quantified as well.

I can use this feedback in various ways, to tell multiple stories. I can say, for instance, that all students mentioned at least one of the targets of the instruction session – an indicator of success! Or I could point out that almost 25% of the students in the session specifically mentioned the value of the presentation.

In another vein I can pull specific comments for their own individual stories, such as this one on the value of recording searches. **[Slide 5]** The last paragraph says "keeping a list of what we have searched is a wonderful idea because I often search the same thing." This, a research log in concept, is something I have been promoting with several faculty. Granted one comment isn't going to carry the day, but it is ammunition!

For a different audience, say, next year's API class, highlighting comments such as these [**Slide 6**] from two different students on the value of the session from a student point of view can tell the story that instruction in information skills can be helpful, can make them more effective, and by implication can get them better grades! This is especially important for a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year class since students at that level tend to assume they know it all already!

Faculty and students are not the only audiences of course. It is useful for Library Administration to hear feedback on value and impact as well.

Obviously big numbers are not always necessary, and in fact not possible in many situations. LibQual justifies a very low return rate as long as the respondents are "representative." Usability testing rests on the assumption that having just five participants will uncover 90% of the problems.

### Use stats as story material

Statistics themselves can tell a story. [**Slide 7**] For instance, our use stats were down last year, as you can see from the slide. Checkouts were down. Internal use was down.

I presented this information at a school faculty meeting, asking for input on why this might be happening. This set the stage for stories on the value for students in using the library. One faculty mentioned that students will only investigate print resources if faculty require it. Another shared his experience of bringing his class to the library and with them browsing materials and identifying key sources. We even discussed other ways of showing use of the library beyond statistics. One faculty seems open to the idea of having the students write up a paragraph reflecting on how library use helped with their studio project.

Circ is up this year and I have seen faculty in here at least a bit more!

### Surveys as story material

Survey results can provide rich story veins to mine. For instance I administered an Information Awareness Survey [**Slide 8**] to students in the School of Architecture – all disciplines, all years – getting input on whether they thought various information skills were important, and where they thought they fell in terms of skills level.

The survey seemed to confirm expectations, as students reported their skill level improving as they made their way from first year to graduate school [with some anomalies]. This in itself is of interest, and serves to give the survey results some credibility. The most interesting results were the unexpected. There was one skill that students of all levels felt they had mastered: *avoidance of plagiarism* [**Q. 10 on the**

**slide] [Explain what they are seeing on the slide in terms of results. Red = highest number of results.]** This became a story, since obviously faculty and students are not in agreement on this! *And* it reinforced the need for instruction (as did the data showing many students do not feel that have high skills in most of the information skills listed!

This survey provided data that served as a base for discussion and exploration. This survey, a systematic assessment technique, provides the weight of numbers, and allows the search for patterns.

## Exhibits as story material

Exhibits provide a less common type of opportunity to collect story material. Observation of the interaction of patrons with the exhibits and interviews with patrons about exhibits can be excellent “bits” -- as are the insights shared through Exhibit Comment Forms.

But what I want to share today is how one specific faculty art show exhibit entry built on statistics to convey a key piece of our library’ s message, that the library is an experience, that it is a series of interactions.

A small percentage of our books have not been used since we moved into the building ten years ago. I was on the verge of weeding them out when I mentioned this group of books to the School’s Exhibits Committee and wondered whether a display might have an impact on use. Assessment studies have been conducted – particularly in public libraries – that show a relationship between visibility and use. My hypothesis was that increasing visibility would generate use.

One of the faculty decided to make these books the base of his art piece for the faculty art show. **[Slide 9]** Although the increase in visibility did not in fact result in any use in this case, the piece did serve to draw attention to the *interaction* between user and book. As the artist put it:

This work and accompanying installation is about this library and our interactions with it: the space, the books, and the information within each. Library staff provided a list of books that have seldom or never been checked out or even de-shelved since being incorporated into the Architecture Studies Library collection. The act of uncovering these books, thumbing through each one, finding something of interest, and recording moments of the browsing process become the sequence that drove the installation. While the arrangement of findings can be seen as a metaphor for the information contained within the walls of this library and the possibility of multiple items within the collection escaping the school by way of under-use, the installation’s main goals are to illustrate the opportunities found when chance encounters are enabled by perusing the depths of the stacks... and to offer a glimpse of the following concept: all information is related and can be integrated. Any one page of the installation may not seem to be of interest on its own, but the sum of experiencing and assimilating all pages may be exceptionally thought provoking. -Glenn Novak

Use and interaction with the library’s materials is highlighted in a unique way, leading to fresh perspectives.

## The Message

In fact the message in many of the stories above is that the library is changing. That the library has an impact. That it plays a key role in education. That it fosters broadening perspectives, a variety of interactions, and collaborations among faculty and students. That it is an ever-changing experience. **[Slide 10]** These images of our new white board table are just another example of interactivity!

## Value of stories – conclusion

So, to conclude, I think there is no question that stories have a valuable contribution to make. Backed by data, stories can play an important role in conveying the image of the library that you are seeking to actualize. **[Slide 11]** Listening, changing – closing the loop as many call it – that is assessment. If we do it right, our libraries will continue to be vibrant and valuable physical and virtual spaces.

Thank you.

## Presentation post-script

As part of the presentation, the audience was asked to complete a “What Stood Out to You?” form. Of the 60 who attended, 20 responded. There were additional verbal comments afterwards which mentioned appreciating seeing assessment from a new perspective and the practical usable nature of the presentation.

19 of the 20 were positive or neutral in that they simply noted some key points. One felt that stories were “cute” but really just assessment. That respondent also objected to calling the feedback form “assessment.”

Eight specifically commented on the quality of the presentation. Thirteen mentioned some part of the content. Four were taken with the uncirculated books exhibit. Nine liked the “stories” concept.

One question during the final section of the session asked how far out do you need to get a story to have it make an impact on countering another story. Although I had no good answer, the question itself is thought provoking.