



Narrative-based evaluation demonstrates the value of a higher education professional learning network



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ABSTRACT

Assessing and demonstrating value for money to agencies funding professional learning networks is a universal challenge. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a narrative-based approach to evaluation called story-building that can be employed to complement other more traditional approaches to evaluation. Story-building goes beyond the anecdotal by constructing individual reflective stories, a collective story and a value creation story that are authentic and resonate with stakeholders because they tap into the specific and particular knowledge of practitioners. A key characteristic which sets story-building apart from other approaches is that it collects and collates both individual and collective evidence of a network's impact from different sources. Members of the New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory Promoting Excellence Network created and implemented this rigorous approach to evaluation and found story-building to be an effective practice to demonstrate the value and impact of a network.

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1. Introduction

Assessing and demonstrating a network's value for money is a universal challenge. Recently, this challenge has become an imperative for higher education learning and teaching networks in Australia (funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)) as government funding for this agency, and consequently the networks, was under threat. In a restructure of the agency, five state-based networks (www.olt.gov.au/state-based-networks) were required to demonstrate their value to secure funding for their continuation. Members of these networks are university representatives responsible for the management of federally funded learning and teaching grants and awards. The authors of this paper are members of the OLT funded New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory Promoting Excellence Network (NSW/ACT PEN).

When faced with the requirement to engage in structured evaluation processes, the NSW/ACT PEN members struggled to determine how to communicate the benefits in a form that would convince the agency to continue funding. Members had regularly discussed the value of the network, and there was a consensus that the value was primarily relational. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a narrative-based approach to evaluation called story-building created and implemented by the NSW/ACT PEN to complement other more traditional approaches to evaluation.

The paper describes the policy background, the evaluation challenge and an innovative narrative-based evaluation approach—story-building—used to demonstrate value to the funding agency in a way that the network members viewed as an authentic representation of its value. A reflexive discussion then pinpoints the key elements of story-building that suggest it is particularly effective in demonstrating the value of a network to stakeholders.

2. The policy context: an imperative to demonstrate network value in a volatile funding environment

The OLT is an Australian Federal Government agency, which “promotes and supports change in higher education institutions for the enhancement of learning and teaching” (<http://www.olt.gov.au>).

Abbreviations: ALTC, Australian Learning and Teaching Council; NSW/ACT PEN, New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory Promoting Excellence Network; OLT, Office for Learning and Teaching; PEN, Promoting Excellence Network.

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gov.au/about-olt). This support includes funding of significant multi-institutional projects, a program of recognising teaching excellence with annual awards and citations, and the funding of networks, which support the activities of the OLT. There are some parallels with national bodies which fund research. A substantial activity of the OLT is the establishment and management of learning and teaching grants.

Since its establishment, the OLT's operation has been affected by a volatile funding environment. In early 2011, the Australian Government announced its intention to cease funding the OLT's predecessor body, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) (Lane, 2011). In response to this announcement, support from organisations which had benefited from the work of the ALTC was quickly forthcoming, and resulted in a review of the decision by government. The review recommended that a new agency (the OLT) "develop a comprehensive research and evaluation strategy to collect and analyse data on the effectiveness and value for money" of programs including networks (Johns, 2011).

At the ALTC's final conference in 2011, the ALTC announced that their own unpublished reviews had determined that networks provided value. Subsequently, new funding for five state-based networks was announced, \$50,000 for each. Each network was now required to produce a plan of activities, a budget and an evaluation plan. This announcement created a sense of urgency within the funded networks, and suggested a need to reconsider the lenses through which networks were evaluated and the measures currently used to demonstrate value such as: number of network events conducted in the funding period, number of participants and higher education institutions represented.

3. The NSW/ACT PEN and its sphere of activities

Each OLT network was funded to "consolidate existing connections in the higher education sector and help foster new collegial and cross-institutional links to generate high-level collaborative approaches to teaching and learning issues" (<http://www.olt.gov.au/networks>). The NSW/ACT PEN was one of the early networks, established in 2008 as part of the ALTC Promoting Excellence Initiative. All NSW and ACT eligible universities were invited to participate and twelve did so (with one exception, where given its geographic location, it was more appropriate to join the Queensland PEN). Network members are appointed by their institution, usually one per institution. They may be professional or academic staff and each institution manages these processes differently. All network members are involved in supporting the programs of the OLT in their university. This support includes:

- Promoting the OLT grant and award schemes within their institution;
- Providing guidance to staff on writing applications;
- Managing administrative processes relating to the funding and award schemes; and
- Establishing institutional processes and schemes to build the capacity of staff to engage in the activities of the OLT. This includes for some institutions, establishing faculty or institutional teaching and learning award and grants schemes and institutional events for recognition of successful award and grant applicants.

Each network provides a forum for sharing good practices and professional learning because individually and together network members sustain:

... an intentional commitment to advance the field of practice, and to share those discoveries with a wider audience. They make their resources and knowledge available to anyone,

especially those doing related work. (Wheatley & Frieze, 2007, p. 4–5)

The NSW/ACT network meets face-to-face at approximately six-weekly intervals. Examples of recent work of the NSW/ACT PEN are available at <http://www.une.edu.au/about-une/executive/pvc-academic/olt/nswact-promoting-excellence-network2>.

4. Evaluation of learning and teaching networks in higher education

The practice of evaluation in higher education most often uses a summative end-of-project approach with a focus on quantitative methods (Australasian Evaluation Society, 2013; Field, 2004; Watermeyer, 2016; Wenger, Trayner & de Latt, 2011). This practice was evident in a review of the literature for learning and teaching project evaluation in higher education that concluded "that when funding bodies mention evaluation it is mainly considered as a summative, reporting and accounting mechanism" (Huber & Harvey, 2013, p. 242). While quantitative evaluation methods have merit a more balanced approach to evaluation is desirable for an entity such as a network. Without this, "even well designed innovations are unlikely to achieve wider dissemination, and potential benefits... are unlikely to be realised" (Alexander, 1999).

While the literature suggests that learning and teaching networks are valuable to individuals and their institutions (Barratt, Ballantyne, Harrison & Temmerman, 2009; Beach & Cox, 2009; Cox, 2002; Johns, 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2010; McDonald & Star, 2008; McDonald et al., 2008; Van Haeringen, Tkacz, Smeal, Diehm, & Stevenson, 2013; Wenger et al., 2011), many network members "struggle to explain what exactly those benefits are and how they can be expressed" (Kurtz & Snowden, 2007; p. 3). They struggle because "numbers alone cannot communicate the impact that a [network] is having on individuals and the communities it serves" (Tobin, Fischman & Sukop, 2013, p. 3). Often, the most salient moments of learning for those involved in networks are ephemeral and only captured in the experiences of participants.

Over the last 10–15 years there has been increasing interest in narrative-based approaches to evaluation, paralleling the growth in narrative inquiry among qualitative researchers. An early example was the narrative-based method developed by Labonte, Feather and Hills (1999, p. 39) in response to health professionals' concerns "that much of their practice did not lend itself to a positivist, or conventional [evaluation] methodology". Narrative-based approaches to evaluation provide an opportunity to capture participants' experiences of being involved in a network, community or change project (for example, McCormack & Milne, 2003; Colton, Ward, & Brutschin, 2007; Dart & Davies, 2003; Field, 2004; Krueger, 2010; Ramstad, 2009; Thorpe, 2011; Tobin et al., 2013) to complement quantitative approaches. Including participants' experiences of contributing to a network in an evaluation "puts a face on the facts and figures, and helps you to figure out what's working, what's not and why" (California Endowment, 2007).

5. Evaluation through an innovative story-building approach

In determining an evaluation approach which would meet the new requirements of the OLT, the NSW/ACT PEN members concluded that quantitative measures could be used to assess aspects of the network activities, such as attendance at events and overall satisfaction with events. There was also consensus that the value of the network to its members, and the sustainability of OLT programs for the participating institutions, and the OLT itself, was in essence, relational and affective. That is, benefits which did not

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