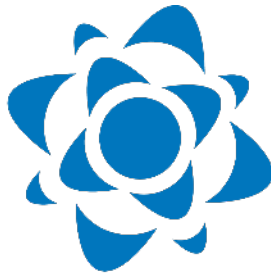# A guide to writing learning improvement stories with your faculty

From start to finish

December 9, 2021

Learning Improvement
Community

Once upon a time there was a tutor
who was always in search of new learning suitors.
An inhabitant of the land of scholars
of which there were many
though in truth, quality and improvement lessons
there were not any.
A story guide was to be formed
with a process to be normed.
It is a guide to the what, where, how, and why
that would increase knowledge
over all land, sea, and sky.

Audience and Purpose

This guide is for assessment practitioners, especially those working at program and institutional level. This guide will walk through four steps in collecting and crafting learning improvement stories: (1) Identifying a story; (2) Engaging faculty; (3) Crafting a compelling story; and (4) Rewarding the story writers. This guide includes a variety of strategies, examples, sample email templates, and story templates. It assumes that you are knowledgeable of learning improvement and the tenets (www.learning-improvement.org).

Part I: **Identify**	Part II: **Engage**	Part III: **Craft**	Part IV: **Reward**
How to identify a learning improvement story at your institution	How to engage faculty in writing a learning improvement story	How to craft a compelling story	How to reward and recognize the story writers

Part I

How to identify a learning improvement story at your institution

Identify   Engage   Craft   Reward

Analyzing existing documents

Identifying a learning improvement story starts with examining the existing documents on campus that record faculty's efforts and excellence in assessment, curriculum, and teaching. Consider the following list:

Annual program assessment reports are the primary source for identifying success stories.

Annual program assessment reports

Annual program assessment reports are the primary source for identifying success stories. Not only can analyzing annual assessment reports identify programs that have started the LI process, but also those that are about to do so. This can provide an opportunity to "get in on the ground floor" and help make sure that the LI process is well-implemented — and identify a story in the making. Potential stories would be those in which the program reported students' assessment results prior to and after program interventions. See example reports of the [Building Construction MBC](#) (from p.10) and [Human Development and Family Studies BS](#) (from p. 16) programs from Auburn University and the [Psychology BA/BS](#) and [Economics BA](#) programs from the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa.

Institutional, general education, or co-curricular assessment reports

Institutions are expected to conduct periodic assessment of institutional learning outcomes and/or general education learning outcomes. Cross comparison of the reports from multiple years may yield useful findings of potential improvement stories. Assessment reports from student affairs and co-curricular programs are another source.

University initiative/grant reports

Some universities have internal grant programs to support innovative teaching. Many national grants focus on cultivating next-generation scientists and developing innovative teaching and curriculum. We can seek out the unit on campus that collects the grant reports. From them, we can either get access to the publicly available reports or reach out to the grant's principal investigators to learn more about their stories. We can also look for places where change in pedagogy is promoted or solicited via calls for proposals initiated by Centers for Teaching and Learning, Provost's Offices, Faculty Senate, and Centers for High Impact Practices, etc.

Program review & status change reports

In many institutions, programs are expected to report their assessment efforts and plans to a program review team. In some universities, when programs petition to change their status from *new* to *established*, they are required to demonstrate how they have used learning assessment for improvement. In programs where learning outcomes were assessed again after the improvement actions, these stories can be honed for publication.

Professional accreditation reports

Many professional accreditors require that programs demonstrate continuous improvement through assessment of student learning. Examples of such professional accrediting bodies include, ABET for engineering programs, CCNE for nursing, NASPAA for public administration and public service programs, and NAAB for architecture as a few examples. There might be abundant stories in these professional accreditation reports.

Faculty's teaching and assessment showcase work

Institutions may use a variety of ways to showcase excellence in teaching and program assessment work. For example, a Center for Teaching and Learning may invite faculty to present on their effective teaching practices. Institution and program newsletters, campus news, poster events, and conferences may feature excellent teaching and assessment work. Assessment practitioners can collaborate with instructional designers and professional developers to identify LI stories, which can then be developed for presentation at assessment conferences and/or publication in an academic journal.

Interacting with programs

In addition to analyzing existing documents and materials, assessment practitioners can be mindful of potential LI stories when providing consultations to program assessment coordinators. Leverage interaction opportunities with departmental assessment and curriculum leaders by asking questions such as:

❖ *What data motivated you to initiate this intervention?*
❖ *What actions did the program take based on what you found about student learning?*
❖ *Did you assess how well students did after the program's improvement actions? What were the results like?*
❖ *How do we know that the improvement in assessment results are due to the actions taken?*

Part II
How to engage faculty in writing a Learning Improvement story

Motivating faculty to write an LI story

Engaging faculty in writing a Learning Improvement story starts with highlighting the good work of the program, briefly outlining the requirements of the story submission, describing the benefits of the written product to faculty and the program, and providing support with the writing process. We've expanded on each of these areas below:

Highlight the good work of the program

This story needs to be told!

Highlight the good work of the program and the need to share it with others. Encourage faculty that this story needs to be told! The significance of the learning improvement that took place within the program should be highlighted, celebrated, and showcased. State the need to tell and share this success story both internally and with the larger higher education community.

Outline the requirements of the story submission

Writing a submission to LIC is manageable!

It is quite manageable to publish your story on the [Learning Improvement Community](#)'s website. The stories can be a short written piece (500-1000 words, recommended), a 3-5 minute video, or approximate equivalent in images or a combination of formats.
Accepted formats include
- Narratives: doc, docx, rtf
- Videos: avi, wmv, flv, mov, mp4 [1 GB video file limit]
- Images: PDF, jpg, png [10 MB file limit]

Describe the benefits of the written product to faculty and the program

Describe the benefits of writing the LI story to the program and the faculty. Clearly articulate what's in it for them and relate the LI approach to their discipline, where possible.

a. Emphasize opportunities for publication, especially in their own discipline. Outline how an LI story can be used as a springboard for future presentations and publications. Publication venues include but are not limited to:
   - Teaching/education journal in their discipline
   - *Journal of Research & Practice in Assessment*
   - *NILOA Assessment in Practice*
   - *Assessment Update*
   - *Intersection of Assessment and Learning*

b. Emphasize opportunities for presentation, especially in their own discipline. Venues include but are not limited to:
   - Teaching/education conference in their discipline
   - Assessment Institute - Learning Improvement Track
   - AALHE conference
   - on-campus or regional conference

c. Published LI stories can support program reviews and specialized accreditation reports

d. LI stories provide evidence for faculty review (e.g., promotion and tenure portfolio, faculty annual review, curriculum vitae, etc.)

e. LI stories can support teaching awards or nominations

f. LI stories increase university reputation and helps programs/faculty gain university and leadership recognition

Let's leverage this for programmatic and professional purposes.

Provide support with the writing process

State your willingness to support programs and faculty in writing the LI story. Modes of support are outlined below (from least to most resource-intensive)

a. Show examples by linking to the LI website or adding a story as an email attachment

b. Share the list of guiding questions for story writing on Page 20

c. Share the template described in Part III

d. Offer to draft the stories for faculty to modify (as time allows)

e. Provide support for the manuscript and/or presentation by offering to co-write/present, offer templates, bibliographies, and so on

f. Organize collaborative writing sessions or a learning community for the LI practitioners and writers

Let's start writing!
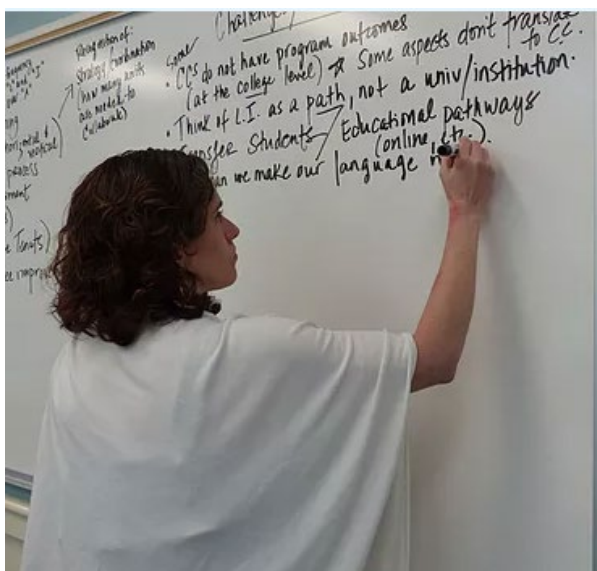
Email templates to engage faculty in LI story writing

Sample 1: Short email

Subject: *A showcase opportunity for your Good assessment work.*

Dear [First Name] [Last Name], [Assessment Role]

In your recent annual assessment report, you describe a successful program assessment intervention involving _____ . We would very much like to talk with you about the opportunities and benefits of writing this process up for publication and presentation, and how we could support you in this process. How about we set up a short meeting to discuss?

I am available to meet on
- *[Date/time 1]*
- *[Date/time 2]*
- *[Date/time 3]*

If these times don't work, suggest a couple times that you can meet. I look forward to talking about showcasing your work.

Talk soon.

"I look forward to talking about showcasing your work."

Sample 2: Detailed email

Subject: *You did something worth publishing!*

Dear [First Name] [Last Name], [Assessment Role]

[Highlight their good work and the need to share]
I reviewed your latest assessment report and it's clear that your program has made significant efforts to improve student learning. This is a major accomplishment and your program should share this with the higher education community.

[Outline the ask]
There is a national repository of Learning Improvement Stories which serves the higher education community with compelling examples of learning improvement interventions and this would be a great place for us to start. They ask for a short written/video submission. Then you can take this write-up and leverage it for professional and programmatic purposes. I could see how this would easily transfer to .... [outline three of the benefit areas below based on the faculty member/department]

[Lay out your support]
We could set up a working meeting to outline the data that prompted action, the action that was taken, and its impact on student learning. Attached is a short list of questions [see P.19] *that can guide our write-up.*

Are you interested in sharing and publishing this work?

[Give meeting availability]

"Are you interested in sharing and publishing this work?"

Identify **Engage** **Craft** **Reward**

Sample 3: Email to engage faculty whose LI is "in-the works"

Subject: *Looks like you have an area of student learning that you want to improve.* OR *Are you interested in sharing and publishing this work?*

Dear [First Name] [Last Name], [Assessment Role]

I'd like to talk a bit more with you sometime about the _____ intervention that you discuss in your annual assessment report. I'd also like to discuss **Learning Improvement**—*a systematic, and a relatively new approach to using assessment in the pursuit of increased student learning at the program level. The approach is described in the attached, and here--* https://www.learning-improvement.org/

It would be great to keep this Learning Improvement model in mind as your program implements the intervention, and perhaps lay the groundwork to document it. There are relatively few well-implemented and well-documented examples of successful Learning Improvement interventions in US Higher Education, and there would be great potential for you and your colleagues to publish in journals like RPA Journal | Journal of Research & Practice in Assessment *and others. There is also a track for Learning Improvement at the* Assessment Institute, *the most highly-regarded conference for program assessment, with opportunities for presentations. While it will be wonderful, in and of itself, when the intervention pays off in terms of increased student achievement, it would also be great for your program to serve as a model within US Higher Ed for successful Learning Improvement.*

> *"It would be great to keep this Learning Improvement model in mind as your program implements the intervention, and perhaps lay the groundwork to document it."*

Part III

How to craft a compelling story

Short story writing for academics

Engaging faculty in crafting an LI story, and a compelling one at that, starts with the basic tenets of a short story that include rooting the story in the setting and characters, bringing out a point of conflict, developing a plot, planning a plot twist, and coming to the resolution and moral of the story. We have expanded on each of these areas below because we are guessing that you may be new to creative writing. We have also provided an example, with somewhat exaggerated language, to give you a taste of the short story writing style. You and your colleagues can certainly choose a language style that you feel most comfortable with: conventional or creative!

Setting & characters - The where, when, what and who

The setting is the time and the place of the story. This provides the institutional context and what the program/team set out to do. The characters are the faculty, departments, or offices involved in the story.

Guiding questions
- Where and when does the LI story take place?
- Who was involved?

In the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean, on the island of Oahu, at the Excellence University, the faculty in the Fantastic program deeply care about student learning…

Example

Conflict - What wasn't working?

A short story needs a single point of conflict, a dilemma, a problem to be solved, or a decision to be made. Describe the tension surrounding the conflict. For example, what is the area of student learning that faculty were not happy with? How long has this been an issue?

Guiding questions
- What was the baseline assessment data?
- What was the biggest challenge or obstacle before the learning improvement journey?

Over the years, they had discovered that Ph.D. students consistently failed the quantitative methods portion of the qualifying exam. But it has just been whispering rumors spreading in the wind. In a rainy season in November of 2015, the eight faculty members in the department held a round table meeting and set out on a quest to investigate and improve students' performance on the qualifying exam.

Example

Plot - What happened?

The plot outlines the sequence of actions taken by faculty to improve student learning.

Guiding questions
- What intervention or change did you/the team decide to make aimed at learning improvement?
- How did you/the team decide to make the change that you did?
- Who led the change?
- What were the major steps taken to implement the change aimed at improving student learning?

Plot twist - What didn't go according to plan?

This section outlines any barriers or roadblocks that the characters encountered along the way, and the heroes or heroines that provided support.

Guiding questions
- What resistance/barriers were encountered while implementing the change?
- How did you/the team overcome any resistance/barriers?
- Who were the biggest supporters in making the change?

Plot

Jane Smith, a woman with a meticulous analytical mind, collected students' scores on the qualifying exam for the past five years. Her findings show that not a single soul who took the exam passed the exam the first time from 2015-2020. The finding is so alarming that she was hesitant to share it with her colleagues, especially knowing that Mary Taylor has been the only faculty teaching the required quantitative methods course. Would people be judgmental about Mary's course? Would the finding affect her reputation and her tenure promotion in a negative way? As she recovered from the aftershock of discovery and discussed her dilemma with the assessment guru on campus, she began to realize that the failure of all students should not and cannot possibly be the fault and responsibility of one faculty member. It is a system issue and can only be solved through programmatic actions. She collegially reached out to Mary to seek her input. They engaged in collaborative problem-solving and determined that the exam questions are not aligned with what Mary was teaching in the class. Mary also thinks that the closed-exam format is doing students a disservice because it does not resemble what students do in real-life situations. Jane and Mary presented their findings together to the department curriculum committee. After thoughtful discussions, the 8 faculty members came up with a concrete action plan that includes …

Plot Twist

There were quite a few potholes and roadblocks to navigate before they could implement the changes but thanks to… the improvement actions were successfully implemented.

Example

Resolution & moral - How did it all work out?

The resolution describes the final outcome (e.g., improved learning results) of the story. The moral of the learning improvement story could include any lessons learned or advice for others.

Guiding questions
- How did you/the team monitor whether or not the change was made?
- What positive outcomes can be demonstrated as a result of the assessment processes?
- What reactions have you heard from those affected?
- What steps were taken to ensure the change is sustained?
- What is the biggest lesson learned through this experience?
- If you could give some advice to others who wanted to replicate your success, what would you tell them?

Resolution

Time flies. Three years after the implementation of the action plans, the most recent assessment results showed that Ph.D. students who took the new qualitative exam have passed it the first time. In fact, 80% passed it with flying colors. Interviews with five students showed that X, Y, Z improvement actions were particularly instrumental to students' improved exam performance.

Moral

Through completing the quest of investigating students' performance on the qualification exam, faculty learned the most important part of assessment is collaborative reflection and decision-making.

Example

Identify   Engage   **Craft**   Reward

LI story questions

Setting & characters
1. Where and when does the LI story take place?
2. Who was involved?

Conflict
1. What was the baseline assessment data?
2. What was the biggest challenge or obstacle before the learning improvement journey?

Plot
1. What intervention or change did you/the team decide to make aimed at learning improvement?
2. How did you/the team decide to make the change that you did?
3. Who led the change?
4. What were the major steps taken to implement the change aimed at improving student learning?

Plot twist
1. What resistance/barriers were encountered while implementing the change?
2. How did you/the team overcome any resistance/barriers?
3. Who were the biggest supporters in making the change?

Resolution
1. How did you/the team monitor whether the change was made?
2. What positive outcomes can be demonstrated as a result of the assessment processes?
3. What reactions have you heard from those affected?
4. What steps were taken to ensure the change is sustained?

Moral
1. What is the biggest lesson learned through this experience?
2. If you could give some advice to others who wanted to replicate your success, what would you tell them?

Part IV

How to reward and recognize the story writers

Why recognize the story writers

Celebrating the story writers not only acknowledges our colleagues' efforts, but also sends a signal to the campus that learning improvement work is important. It conveys that the institution is proud of the achievement and recognizes the story writer and their team as the leaders of teaching, learning, and assessment. It positions the writer as the assessment champion who can inspire others. Furthermore, it can support the story writers in their contract renewal, tenure, and promotion efforts.

Reward and recognition strategies

1. Send a congratulation letter to the story writer and copy the Department Chair, Dean, and/or campus-level leaders.

2. Draft a congratulation letter for your campus-level leaders for them to send to the story writer.

3. Write an unsolicited letter to support the story writers' tenure and promotion.

4. Spotlight in newsletter and campus news.

5. Invite the story writer to a reception with department, college, and campus leaders.

6. Invite the story writer as a guest speaker in assessment workshops.

7. Fund the story writer to present and support them to publish.

8. Nominate the writers for an award such as Excellence in Assessment.

9. Set up a learning improvement grant to provide funding and opportunities to present on campus and beyond.

Contributors

This guide is a product initiated as part of the Learning Improvement Summit 2.75 in April 2021 and integrated feedback from summit participants and members of the Learning Improvement Community.

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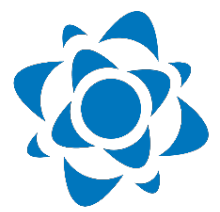Old Dominion University
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