OSEP Symposia Series: Conveying Our Stories – Displaying Our Data

October 10, 2017

Questions and Answers

Are there other methods or communication tools you recommend to reach legislators besides meetings and Twitter?

>>Jane West: Those are two of my favorites but there certainly are. Pretty much every legislator has a regular way of being in touch with their constituents through town halls or even newsletters with Q&A, websites, you can submit questions on their website or comments. So that is one way. Legislators who work in Washington are always home in their district too so if you're interested in making contact with one of your national senators or representatives, like this week they call it district work period, we call it recess, but they like district work period. So they are at home in the districts and they are available for meetings so you don't feel like you have to come to Washington.

Another great thing to do is to invite them to visit your program. They love to have photo ops especially with kids. So take them to a classroom, have them meet the parents you're working with, get the press there, they really, really like that. Another one that I knew one group that used to give them awards [Laughter] and invite them to accept the award. Now, the award should be legitimate in my opinion. So you can be creative with strategies. Just assume that they want to know what is happening in their district. That's their job to represent - whether they agree with you or not, they need that information because they can do their job better when they know what is happening.

What do you mean when you say that some types of data are more convincing than others to certain audiences?

>>Jill Lammert: Yes. So when you are working for example with funders, you might want to present more quantitative findings related to a rigorous evaluation that you've conducted. So it might be an infographic that displays quantitative results or it might be tables or some other thing or a GIS map like what Todd talked about with DaSy that shows how your project is reaching people across the country or across different regions of the country. If you're working with, for example, academics who are working interested in learning about specific benefits to a particular population group, they might want some more qualitative data related to narrative stories about people, how they're being affected, or they also might want quantitative data but they might want something more, either video clips or anecdotes or that kind of thing. So you got to think about who you are communicating with and what kinds of things that they're going to want to be interested in for the purpose that they're going to use the information for.

Do you have recommendations for best practices when deciding how long or dense to make infographics?

>> Clement Coulston: That's a great question. One of the things I again help people to do is think about "what is the expected outcome?" and being able to pull the information together and then you visually

piece the information together. Then you'll be able to see "This is way too much." Or oftentimes, what I do is I reach out to a colleague who has not even seen the infographic before and I would be like "What is this infographic telling you or what does it need, what is it asking you to do?" That's a great indicator to be able to say, okay, is it too much, is it too little, am I getting to the point where I want to get to as well. But I often say that it is not just a one-shot deal where people sit down in five minutes to find out the infographic. It will take some time but the impact is immense. So this definitely – it's continuous enhancement with it.

What if you asked to meet with a legislator and get bumped to the staff? Should you say okay or speak up?

>>Jane West: No. You should say "Great, sounds good." I used to work in the Senate so see, I can say that as a former staff person. Oftentimes, legislators depend on their staff for information and advice and sometimes legislators are so busy. I mean you think about if you're a senator, you got to be concerned about foreign relations, agriculture, you name it. So the time and the knowledge base you bring to a discussion about special ed, for example, is not likely to be particularly broad. However, your staff person whose job is to cover education and maybe some other things as well is going to have a bigger knowledge base, a broader set of information to talk with you about. So sometimes I'd even say it is better to meet with the staff. So I would just go with the flow.

What are some considerations when creating a communication around a contradictory finding from your evaluation?

>>Jill Lammert: That's a great question. That is something that's likely to happen or at least not unusual. You might find some contradictory information that comes from your evaluation. So what we always do is try to collect as much data as possible about implementation, related to fidelity, related to social validity, these kinds of things so that when you are getting these contradictory findings, you can actually have a little bit more information to inform what you're finding. Also an important part of it is maybe having a plan in advance to what you're going to do if you have contradictory findings or if you have negative findings. Really, you should not consider contradictory or negative findings to be bad per se because there's more information. You are gleaning some information from it no matter what. So if you plan in advance for how you're going to communicate it, you make sure you develop a design and implement as rigorous an evaluation as possible and collect the data that you need to answer these questions, I think you can effectively address that.

Is it worth it to meet with a policymaker who you know will disagree with you? How would one handle that information?

>>Jane West: Absolutely. Yes. [Laughter] I think the key thing to remember is that you are a constituent. Even when you haven't voted for someone or you think "This is a waste of my time," they don't think the federal government for example should have any role in education or whatever, you are still a constituent. The other thing is you never know what sort of personal connection might unfold. I've had people meet with members of Congress and learned that the person went to school with their mother or - and that is helpful, those personal connections. You are also an expert. So you're a constituent but you're also an expert. So you, by bringing information not only from your expertise but from what's happening in the district of the person, you are really helping the legislator and their staff to look good.

When they go to a meeting and some other staffer says to them, “Well, what is happening your district with this?” They will know. Part of it is just a knowledge base. So if that person was elected to represent you, then meet with them. That doesn’t mean you’ll meet with them forever but you certainly should do it.

How can you help your stakeholders to share your infographic beyond their organization?

>> Clement Coulston: That is an excellent question. The power of the hashtag is one of the things that I’d really like to emphasize on and I loved how you were talking what about Twitter. So for those who do not know, hashtag, also known as the pound sign, is I call it to be the glue of Twitter. It’s able to bring together streams of information of the same ideas. So if I'm interested in school climate, I can simply search the hashtag “schoolclimate” to see what are people talking about, what are folks sharing, and are conversations happening that I may want to be a part of. So the first thing is identifying, okay, so what are some relevant hashtags that anyone can create that pertain to what I'm trying to reach out? Just yesterday, the place I work with, recently disseminated an infographic on helping kids after natural disasters. So we used the recent events such as Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Irma as a way to see that folks were looking at these hashtags, they’re able to say “Wait, here's a nice infographic.” So that's one way. Another way is to also join Twitter chats. They happen all the time. You can just simply google Twitter chats and see what are some relevant ones that may be pertaining to this topic that I would want to collaborate and join on as well. Thank you.

Are there specific online platforms you recommend we use to create the data visualizations and other infographics you've shared today? How difficult are these platforms to use?

>>Todd Grindal: So I think as the amount of data available both in the private and public sector has grown, so do the tools that are available to work with that data. There are now dozens out there and they range from tools that are often built on to your computers when you get them to really advanced systems that you have to purchase and get some training to work with. I think what I would encourage people to do is to take a look and to see what tools match up with their technical skills, the technical skills required range from basic understanding of Excel to complex programming, and how that fits with the message you are trying to convey. On the website that we shared earlier on the DaSy Data Visualization Toolkit, we list some of the more common tools and provide links to them. Many of them have free trials that allow people to try out and see if this works for me, see if it helps to tell the story that I’m looking for.

What do you do to ensure accuracy of the data being presented?

>>Jill Lammert: That’s a complex answer. [Laughter] Obviously, the first point is to ensure that the evaluation is collecting good data to begin with. Actually, on the OSEP Ideas That Work website, CIPP has developed a number of TA products. One of them is a toolkit related to evaluating your special education project. There’s a lot of information in there about things like data cleaning and collecting data and getting that kind of information. So that might be a good resource that people can go to look at but essentially it's basically ensuring that you have well-trained data collectors, going out, and checks in place to validate the data that are coming in and ensuring that they’re high quality. Once you get them, you have a database set up that can work and then you clean it and make sure there's a series of steps related to cleaning all that are outlined in that toolkit.

Then often you'll have checks that you have people going back and maybe going back to original data set and checking to see the original data, then the second data, and kind of verify it. So it's a little bit more complex to summarize in a few minutes but I would definitely suggest going on to the OSEP Ideas That Work website and looking under evaluation resources and section of resources for grantees and seeing some of the tools that are available to help you learn about how best to ensure that you are collecting and using high-quality data.

>>Todd Grindal: I think for researchers and a problem that some researchers have is failing to understand, particularly for administrative data, the process by which the data was collected. I think it can be really useful to take that step and to understand where did that student information come from, who reports that, was it a reported at a school or a program level, and who is that person so you can get a sense of how concerned might I be about the accuracy of these data or what might've gone wrong and led us to kind of get the wrong information there. So taking a step back and really understanding the process by which those numbers arrived on your computer screen can be really helpful for heading off problems.

How do you focus that data for different audiences, so the different audiences such as parents or teachers, educators, administrators and know how to use or understand that data?

>>Todd Grindal: I think it is again taking a moment to understand, to think about what their perspective would be on that. That's information that you don't have already. It's always useful to ask. I think you never want to attempt to kind of bring down the data or to say something that is not accurate but to try to be as clear as possible for what your audience may be interested in. I think some of your points about policymakers, they don't want a long paper with tables but your more technical audience will. If you're trying to communicate to other researchers out in the field, they are going to let us see those things and make sure that the information that you provided is accurate. So I think in some cases, one of the things that we try to do is to make multiple versions of it. So we will often try to make a single-page version of what we're saying, a two-page, and then the full report that has all of the information so people may engage in it at whatever level that is to the right level of detail for them.

How do you ensure that the infographics are 508-compliant?

>>Clement Coulston: Using alternate text is a really key aspect in being able to describe – so a lot of times, some of the infographics that I created are the ones that I showed you today, that was created with Microsoft PowerPoint which a lot of people have already. There's some unique features within PowerPoint that you're able to create alternate text so you're able to describe what is actually in that visual or in the picture that you are trying to share so that people who use screen readers are able to still access information. Twitter, which is a great venue that people use to share tweets as well as pictures, allows folks to use alternate text for attaching images. So that's another thing to consider as well when you're attaching infographics to your tweets or visuals, how are you ensuring that folks are able to interact with that maybe using different ways to interact with that information itself. I also highly encourage my colleagues today going onto OSEP Ideas That Work website, there's a tab that is 508 compliant talks about using Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel. It has a lot of different resources as well. I highly urge folks to check that out.

Do you have any suggestions for updating data in real time or regularly? What are your suggestions or best practices for people?

>>Todd Grindal: I think like with a lot of things, it depends on the type of data and how frequently you're looking to do that. Some of the tools that we mentioned provide some simple, straightforward ways for that to happen automatically. When you're looking at static indicators, things that are just going to be on paper or an image on a screen, I think to have those updated on a schedule that's relevant for your audience and that is relevant for the story you are trying to tell. Are you trying to talk about change over time? Then think about what are the appropriate time points along the way for doing that.

>>Jill Lammert: I would add also that it also depends on your audience's needs are. So if it's a one-time presentation that you're making to show where you are in the midterm of your project, well, you don't need to update it. But if you need to keep updating them quarterly for example, if you're talking with a group of project participants and they are the ones who are implementing your project in the classroom and you have maybe quarterly meetings with them, then you will just set up a process to have a quarterly update with them. So it requires a little work on the backend but you might have some templates that are set up already that then you can just feed the data into when you run it again. So I think it depends on, like Todd said, what you're doing and what you’re using it for but then who your audience is and what are their needs for data that are updated and with the frequency of that.

>>Todd Grindal: The point about having templates is really great and having them clearly labeled, knowing where they are. So you do the hard work the first time in making your data utilization and then the second time, in many cases, it can be just adding a column or changing the numbers that are in those cells so that you can continue to do that but having that clearly organize, knowing where to go back can save quite a bit of time.

>>Jill Lammert: One more thing, sorry. If you have a need for frequent updates of data, if there's a reason for that, it might be worth making initial investment in putting together a data dashboard that is actually fed from real-time data that are entered you’re your database so that the particular user of that dashboard can go in and they click on what they need to click and automatically those data are feeding in from the database that they have. So if that’s something that you need for your project, it really might be worth making that initial investment to create that right up front.

How do you ensure your audiences are actually being reached?

>>Jill Lammert: I’ll start. One thing that I think is important to do is before even getting to the point of reaching them is doing a test drive with your potential audiences to see if they can even understand the message that you are trying to convey. So you reach out to representatives of your audience and you do a test drive so you ask them, “how do you understand the message, what do you get from it, does it contain the information that you need, and then is it accessible to use?” So that’s an initial point to it. You could survey them. You could reach out to them. There's different ways that you could find out but it’s going to require a little bit of effort on your part to get in contact with them to follow up. Twitter could be a way because if you are doing that and you’re getting people responding, all of a sudden you're getting followers, you’re getting people interested in your message and then retweeting and sharing, then you know that they're getting the message and they’re reaching the message.

>>Clement Coulston: Using different tools for social media, so Instagram, they recently had this new initiative where you can use stories to be able to show people, almost in live time, what's happening. Recently, they also included a polling feature so you can post something up on the screen and then say, ask them a question with yes or no. Then you get feedback so that folks can see what others are sharing but then also provide you feedback. That's helpful. I love what Understood was sharing earlier with “was this page helpful?” Again, I think that’s a great way to – in conjunction with Google Analytics to see what are people clicking on, how long people are staying on the page, what page are they visiting next but also getting that anecdotal data, okay, is this page helpful. Then as a team, you can come together and say, “Okay, so this is what folks are sharing. What can we do from here on this?” You can get it using the social media outlets but seeing what people are using and meeting them where they are just like we talked about earlier, keeping with the stakeholders and meeting where they are.

>>Todd Grindal: I understood your question a little bit differently and that was that is this message that I think I'm communicating, is that actually what they are hearing. People often can take a look at the same information, I’m sure this is true with policymakers and it comes through their filter and that may be ideology or experience or a whole bunch of other things that we can look at the same image, the same data visualization and make very different conclusions from it. What we try to do is create some scaffolds for people when we’re providing graphs or other visualizations. So often what we’ll do is we’ll put a note on the bottom of that that says “Read this as ….” So we’ll take a bar and say “This bar says that 25% of participants in this program achieved meaningful growth” just to make sure that they're reading it the same way, they’re understanding that information, and it is not being kind of taken over by some prior experience or perspective on the issue.

Have you worked with teachers on communicating data? What are tips for teachers to portray data to parents? How do they help explain the message that you are trying to get out there?

>>Todd Grindal: I had some limited experience doing this and I think it is to give them the same principles that we think about when communicating to different audiences, what is it they want to learn from this, what's the story you are trying to tell, and then I think to keep it simple and straightforward.

>>Clement Coulston: I think another aspect to that too is meeting them where they are. One of the things that tends to get me a little upset is when people talk about dumbing down information. I really don’t believe it’s about that. It’s about identifying where stakeholders are and meeting them so that we can go and group together. Oftentimes, it’s about let’s look at this, what is the data telling us, and how is it going to be influencing what we’re going to be doing moving forward. Especially in IEP meetings, it can often feel for the child that they’re just identifying all the stuff that I can’t do or it’s challenging and stuff but rather than saying starting the conversation with “These are the strengths.” Then even if the child is in the IP meeting which hopefully here she is, what are some of your strengths, what are some of your talents, and starting the conversation off in a positive part but then moving towards area of like I shared before with the flashlight shining on areas that you need to focus on moving forward as well. So using data not as a reprimanding piece but really as a way to shine light on what’s moving forward.

How applicable do you feel your tools are across levels in the field (local education agencies, state education agencies)?

>>Jill Lammert: I think they are quite applicable. Obviously what we presented today is targeted more grantees of specific program areas of OSEP but really the ideas are the same across because the idea is to know who your audiences are, know what they want to know, know what they need to know, how to communicate it to them, and what tools you might use. So I think it really doesn't matter that the tool is written for this. The principles can be applied across. I would say that's the same for other resources that we have on OSEP Ideas That Work website. One thing that's kind of related that is also more broadly applicable is another tool that we developed called Demonstrating Evidence across the Project Cycle. So what this does is it kind of walks people through the idea of what does it mean to demonstrate evidence of your project's progress and your results over time. So we walk through the planning, the implementation, and then the results, phases, and kind of think through some resources and checklists and strategy, things that you can look through about that and that's really applicable across all levels as well.

Answered Post-Event

Can you please provide a little more information on the insight tool in Facebook?
>>Eliana Tardio and Joseph La Belle: The Facebook insight tool allows you to analyze your audience to strengthen it based on demographics and preferences. This information is helpful to measure your impact in the community and can be essential in order to create online target campaigns or boosting. The insight tool provides you the following information:

- Demographics overview – Age range, gender (as self-identified male or female), education level, job titles, relationship status, and more;
- What your audience enjoys in terms of preferred activities, interests, and hobbies;
- What groups your audience is connected to and what their lifestyle looks like.

How do you know how many people in your target audience are actually using common social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter etc.) and whether they are accessing content there that would enhance their knowledge of your program?

>>Eliana Tardio and Joseph La Belle: Our initiative to use social media is based on the foundation of amplification, which means, in this context, to expand the use of traditional tools in order to increase engagement through technology. Our approach is based on the use of those platforms that our continual research shows are most commonly used by those in our target audiences. These include the use of such tools as Facebook Live. We are continually reevaluating where we should be and how we should be present on any given platform so as to most effectively reach those families who were are attempting to reach. This approach is continuously evolving as social media continues to evolve. We are able to measure our impact through analytics, drawn from a number of sources, such as the number of viewers, the total of minutes watched, demographic analysis, and the collection of soft data that is received through comments, private messages, and reactions to the live stream or archived video. We are constantly looking for ways to collect and analyze additional data and information about our social media impact to improve our targeting, reach, and, ultimately, impact.

Are there any recommendations (best practices) to address digital accessibility when you are displaying your data?

>>Kerry Belodoff and Todd Grindal: Each of the nine topics in DaSy's Data Visualization Toolkit include an Accessibility Tips section that provides accessibility considerations and links to additional resources or examples.

What software would you recommend to create infographics?

>>Kerry Belodoff and Todd Grindal: On our toolkit's Infographics page, we provide information on three low-cost or no-cost infographic tools. The online tools all offer a free version and options to purchase premium accounts. The programs we highlight are Venngage, Easel.ly, and Piktochart.

Does your organization have supplemental information or resources to help implementers tailor the tools to their own needs and challenges? Or suggest other websites or organizations to find these resources?

>>Kerry Belodoff and Todd Grindal: DaSy and our partners in other OSEP TA centers can support state IDEA program staff in determining which tools can best support their needs. Depending on the tool, implementers may have to contact the tool vendor for customization.