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# Story Spine: Engaging in the Process of Assessment and Improvement

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Sometimes those of us who swim in quantitative data for a living can forget how enigmatic our world of “mean scores” and “statistical significance correlations” appears to everyone else. To us, this stuff seems as natural as pure spring water. But to most instructors, exhortations to inform pedagogical improvement with course feedback data can feel like a mouthful of salt water.

In many cases, instructors need more than a pile of data and a pep talk. They need a simple and familiar backbone on which they can build a narrative; a story that sounds and feels more like the lives they lead perpetually engaged in the process of learning, teaching, learning, and teaching. So when I stumbled upon a simple framework for telling a story called “[Story Spine](#),” it struck me that this outline would work well as framework for telling a story of perpetual improvement.

The Story Spine was originally developed by Kenn Adams, Artistic Director of the Synergy Theater as a way to help improvisers go into a scene with a shared understanding of how a story works so that, no matter what sort of craziness they discover in the course of their improvising, they know that they are all playing out the same meta-narrative. Simply put, the Story Spine divides a story into a series of sections that each start with the following phrases:

1. Once upon a time . . .
2. And every day . . .
3. Until one day . . .
4. Because of that . . .
5. Because of that . . .
6. Until finally . . .
7. And ever since then . . .

These section prompts can also fit into four parts of a cycle that represent the transition from an existing state of balance (“once upon a time” and “every day”), encountering a disruption of the existing balance (“until one day”), through a quest for resolution (“because of that,” “because of that,” and “until finally”), and into a new state of balance (“and ever since then”).

To me, this story spine sounds a lot like the way an individual educator engages the process of assessment and improvement. As educators, we are often directed to “ask questions,” “gather evidence,” “analyze evidence,” “use results,” and “close the loop.” But to be honest, I like the Story Spine a lot better. Aside from being pretty geeky, the assessment and improvement loop starts with a vague implication that trouble exists below the surface, unbeknownst to us. This might be true, but it isn’t particularly comforting. Furthermore, the assessment loop doesn’t seem to leave enough room for all of the forces that can swoop in and affect our work despite our best intentions. There is a subtle implication that educating is like some sort of assembly line that should work with scientific precision. Finally, the assessment loop usually ends with “using the results” or, at its most complex, some version of “testing the impact of something we’ve added to the mix as a result of our analysis of the evidence.” But in the real world, we are often faced with finding a way to adjust to a new normal—another way of saying that entering a new state of balance is as much a function of our own adjustment as it is the impact of our interventions.

So if you've ever wondered if there was a better way to convey the way that we live an ideal of continual improvement, maybe the Story Spine is a more useful tool. And maybe if we were to orient ourselves toward the future by thinking of the Story Spine as a map for what we will encounter and how we ought to be ready to respond, maybe—just maybe—we will be better able to manage our way through our own stories.